

November 15th

Adventure



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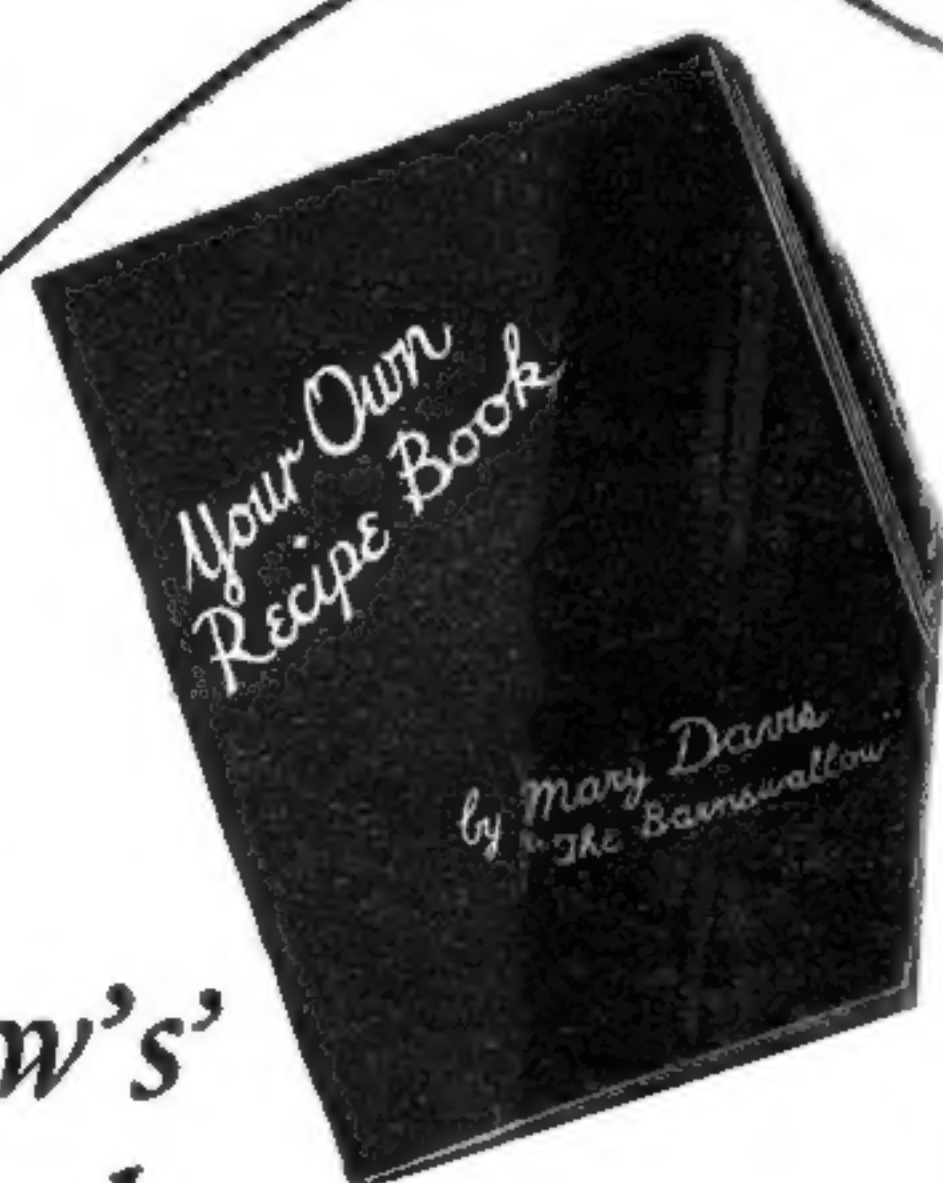
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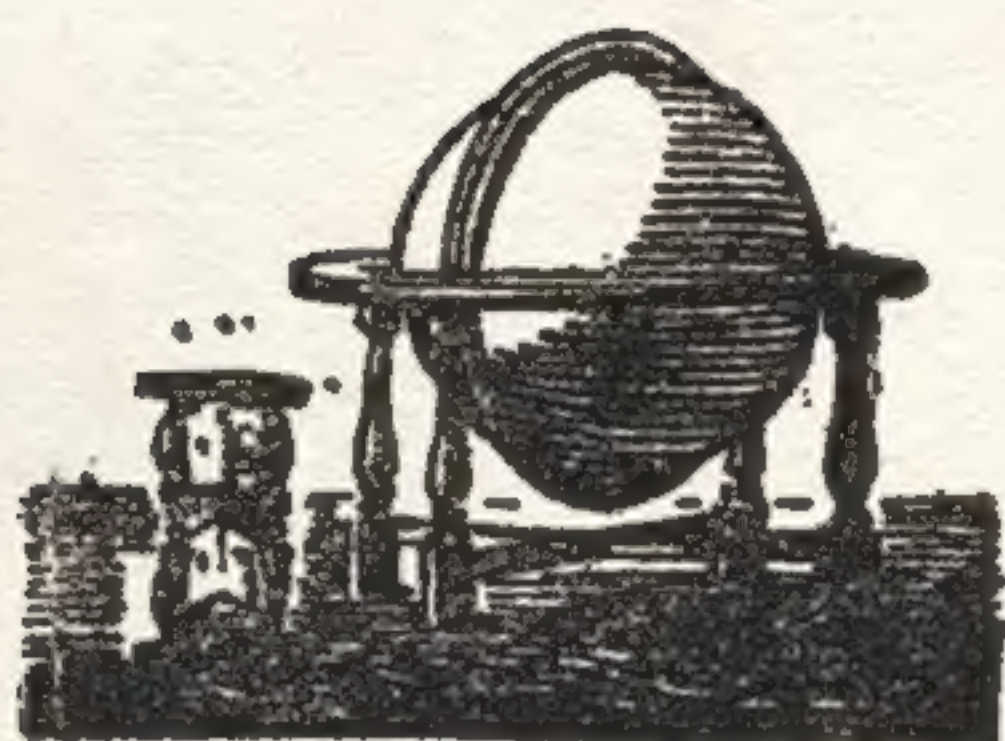
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Anthony M. Rud
EDITOR

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Baki the Wise who stood between the

THE ROAD

A Complete Novelette

IT IS written: Thy wealth will not save thee, if thy deeds destroy thee.

And I have seen a man who had a great store of gold under his hand, yet he was slain by his own deeds. It was in the year one thousand and twenty and nine*, when I was journeying to the land of Ind—I, Daril, the Arab of the *sahra*, the desert land.

I was then beyond the middle of life and I had sheathed the sword to follow the path of a physician, thirsting to see new lands. I had agreed to pay a camelman of Isfahan ten silver pieces to bring me safely to the frontier of Ind. He was called Sher Jan and he was a rogue.

Yea, a man of loud oaths and many weapons—three knives of different shapes and a rusty tulwar. At times he would draw this sword and flourish it, but I never saw him clean it. In his girdle besides the knives he carried a beard comb and opium and flint and a pouch filled with powder, though he had never owned

a musket. Sher Jan, with his forked beard and his deep voice, had the mien of a lion and the heart of a hare. He called me his lord and his friend, and one evening he spoke very boldly, asking if I carried much money.

This was the evening when we climbed out of the plain and entered the foothills where Iran ends and Ind begins. We followed a shallow valley that became narrower as we advanced, until the ridges of red rock loomed above us like walls. Yellow dust hung around the camels in clouds, until the air in this hour of sunset became a golden haze. The baked earth still gave off the heat of the sun, and the river of the gully was no more than brackish pools. By one of these Sher Jan halted, looking about on all sides and sniffing like a dog. Satisfied, he set his helper to work pulling tamarisk bushes and picking up dead roots, while he loosed the bales from the kneeling camels.

"What place is this?" I asked.

"The Kaizak-davan—the Valley of

*1619 A.D.



Pathan thieves and the Moguls of Ind

TO KANDAHAR

By HAROLD LAMB

Author of "Genghis Khan," "The Guest of Karadak," etc.

"Thieves." He wiped his long nose with his sleeve and looked at me sidewise. "It is well named. If thou hast much money, O my lord, give it to my keeping for the night."

"Nay," I assured him, "our bargain was that thou shouldst protect my possessions from theft and tribute on the road."

"God knows," he muttered, "I deny it not. Yet consider, O favored one, if thy purse and gear be stolen from thee while I sleep, how am I responsible? While if I have them in charge, I must answer for them."

"Answer for thyself!" I cried at him.

Truly the camel driver had sworn to me by the triple oath that he was the master of a large caravan, with many armed followers and that he made the journey from Iran* to Ind several times in the year and had bought immunity from the chieftains who might otherwise plunder caravans along the way. And it turned out that he

had no more than eight camels, laden with red leather and honey and sweet oil, and no more than one sorry servant whose only weapon was a cudgel to beat off dogs.

"Upon thy head be it," he said calmly, meaning that if anything happened to me it would be of my doing, not his.

So I spoke no more, and went and sat, to meditate and enjoy the one good hour of these days when the sun was at the rim of the desert below us. In my belt I had no more than forty silver coins, of which I had agreed to pay Sher Jan ten. But I needed little.

I was alone. My horse, a swift paced dun mare; my sword, a plain Damascus blade with a horn hilt. All other belongings I had given away when I set forth upon my wandering. Yea, wanderers are we, we Arabs of the *sahra*, the desert land.

It is better to be thus free than to be chained; better to ride with few possessions than with many, and far better to journey thus, toward a strange land than to abide in one place, bowed down by

* Persia, then ruled by the great Shah Abbas. Daril and other Arabs called it Iran, but the modern name is substituted hereafter in the narrative.

goods and debts and increasing cares. In my youth it would have been misery to be thus bare of gear and goods, and apart from the eyes of fair young women and the raids of the clans. Now, though I wore still the sword, I sought peace; men called me Shaikh and Hakim—elder and physician.

And yet I was not quite alone. The mare, coming close to my shoulder, stretched down her head, rattling the bit. In my argument with Sher Jan I had forgotten her. I rose, loosed the saddle and lifted it down. I rubbed the slender limbs with a handful of dry grass and freed her from bit and head band, slipping on halter and rope. Then I let her drink at the pool, and gave her a measure of barley and salt. As I was leaving her, she lifted her head and neighed.

In our small caravan we had no other horses. Sher Jan and his follower rode between the camel packs. I looked at Sher Jan and found him heaping more tamarisk upon the pile, already smoking and blazing.

"O one of little wit!" I cried. "If this be truly a place of thieves, why light such a beacon to guide them?"

"In this gully the fire will not be seen," he answered, throwing roots on the fire to show that he cared not for my reproach.

"Nay, look at the smoke."

Down by the pool, hemmed in by ridges of rock, the dusk had deepened, but the sky overhead still glowed, changing from shimmering blue to dull purple. From the heights before us the twisting smoke would be clearly seen against the last of the sunset. Sher Jan squinted up and wiped his eyes with his greasy sleeve.

"True, O Shaikh," he made response, "but we must eat."

"On thy head be it then."

I went and sat by the fire, while he put water and salt and rice and strips of mutton into the pot. The air had become cold of a sudden, and the wind was chill from the snow far above us. It was then the beginning of winter, and Sher Jan said the snow lay in the passes ahead of us, in these mountains that he cursed, calling

them the mountains of the Pathans. Yet he said that the city we would reach the next day was a veritable paradise, a garden spot within the barrens.

This city he swore to be the gateway of the empire of Ind—the end of his road, to which he had made covenant to guide me. And he called it Kandahar, rolling the word upon his tongue as if he loved well the sound of it.

"Verily," he often said, "that is a place good for wine and for profit."

But that evening, although he had set the stew boiling, we ate from a cold pot and at a late hour. Before the last light had left the sky the thieves came.

FIRST my mare neighed again, then I heard hoofs striking upon loose stones. Sher Jan sprang to his feet, but when a dozen riders clattered down into the gully he made no move to draw weapon or to fly. He might have fled, because the horsemen all came along one path and at a hand pace, without attempting to rush us. I thought that one of them had been watching us for some time and that Sher Jan's fire would bring no good.

When the horsemen moved into the firelight I saw they were warriors of a kind strange to me, mounted on scrawny hill ponies. They were armed with light lances, with hair tufts under the points. Over their mail and leather shirts they wore immense gray wool and sheepskin coats, while their reins were heavy with silver; and their leader sat upon a saddle-cloth of embroidered damask.

To Sher Jan he spoke in a language I knew not, and my valiant camel driver with his helper made haste to open up his loads, the leader of the band riding from one bale to the next.

No more than one load of the eight did he order taken—bales of red leather—and divided up into four packs, which his men strapped upon led ponies. Then he of the damask cloth walked his horse over to me and asked a question. When I shook my head, he called out a name.

"Shamil!"

A rider who had kept far from the fire

advanced at the summons—a drowsy man, finely clad in a green and white striped *khalat* edged with soft brown fur. He swayed in the saddle, and his eyes, touched up with dark powder, did not open at all. His lips and thin beard were stained bright red, and he acted as if he had been chewing too much opium.

“O brother of the Arabs,” he greeted me in a droning voice, “pay down the road tax to this man.”

“Who asks it?” I demanded.

His eyelids flickered as if this surprised him.

“I am Shamil, the treasurer of the Hazara band. Who art thou, and whence?”

“Daril of Athir, of the Nejd Arabs,” I answered truthfully, “a physician upon the road to the empire of Ind.”

“To serve whom?”

“If God wills it, the emperor, the Mogul of Ind.” For I had been told that he was the most powerful of rulers, the most fortunate of living men, and I had journeyed from afar to visit his court. “Art thou a servant of the Mogul?”

Shamil laughed, gently.

“Nay, we are kites swooping down from the mountain. Pay us gold!”

I pointed at the shawl that held no more than a headkerchief, my lancet and such things.

“As thou seest”—for the man called Shamil seemed to watch me from under heavy lashes, and when I turned away I felt his eyes upon me—“I am no merchant, nor have I goods with me. What talk is this of gold?”

Then the leader of the band pushed forward, scowling at me and gesturing. He had noticed the dun mare picketed just beyond the firelight.

“We will take the mare,” said Shamil, “and require no more of thee, O Arab.”

Stepping between them, I laid my hand on my sword hilt. *W'allahi*, a man of peace am I, seeking no quarrel! But to take a man's horse in the barrens, without authority, to set him afoot in such a place was the deed of a dog-born dog. Sher Jan edged nearer, plucking at my sleeve and

whispering to me to show no anger.

“Lay hand on the mare,” I said to them, “and more than one man will die—thou, Redbeard, the first.”

At this he opened one eye a little, and would have drawn back, but I held his rein. The leader of the Hazaras made as if to pull out the heavy battle mace in his belt, and I stepped to the far side of Shamil's horse. Sher Jan began to bellow imploringly, and it seemed to me that my road would end here. Against ten horsemen with lances I would not have lived more than a moment—long enough to dispatch the man called Shamil and perhaps, if God willed it, another. For I could strike swiftly and surely with the curved blade, and it was not my habit to draw a weapon without striking.

Shamil and the chieftain spoke together, and he of the damask saddlecloth put back his weapon. Strange it was that he should heed the words of the unarmed Shamil. Long afterward I understood why they had no wish to shed blood in this place.

“By God!” cried he of the striped cloak and red beard. “If thou hast silver, O Daril, we will take it instead of the mare.”

The horsemen crowded around, hearing our dispute, but not understanding what was said. There was nothing to do but to pull the coin bag from my girdle and toss it to Shamil, who caught it deftly enough, for all his sleepy eyes. The Hazara chieftain came over to watch him count the silver dirhems, grumbling because they were so few. But Shamil spoke in his ear, and he seemed satisfied, for he raised his arm, shouting to his men—

“Off!”

They trotted out of the firelight, shouting back mockingly at us until the cliffs overhead gave out the echoes—*Ya-hough! Ya-hou-ugh!* Sher Jan, bending shamefaced over the dying fire, pretended not to hear the taunts or my step when I strode over to him. Nor did he look up when I asked whether this were his promised immunity against raiders.

“Eh,” he said, “I am not rich.”

"What has that to do with thy covenant?"

"Listen to me, my lord! If I had wealth, then I could well pay the heavy tithes to the chieftains of the Hazaras and the Yuzufis. But God has not given to me wealth, so they take a little of my goods."

"Fool! How easily thou and I could have slipped through this gorge, if thou hadst not settled here for the night and lighted a grandfather of fires!"

He stirred the embers and shook his head.

"Nay, my lord. Above us are eyes that see in the night. Besides, the next time they would have taken all my goods, and I am a poor man with only eight camels to my hand, and five daughters and three small sons to feed."

Now I was very angry at him, because of the near loss of the dun mare and the vanishing of my silver.

"At least, Sher Jan," I reminded him, "thou wilt have no payment for thy guidance, since thy ten dirhems have gone off with these Hazaras, with my purse."

"God is great," the stubborn fellow answered readily, "because my lord is a shaikh and a man of his word. Also, he is a *hakim* of reputation; and soon in Kandahar he will have silver to repay his servant."

"Repay! What have I to repay? May dogs dig up thy father's grave!"

"Nevertheless," said Sher Jan calmly, "I asked my Lord Daril to give his money to my keeping, and he chose not so to do. What happened, he brought upon his own head."

When he said this I kicked him into the ashes and sat down by the pot. Truly, it was not fitting for a chieftain of the Nejd, son of a chieftain, to quarrel with a carrier of goods. Convinced by my silence that he would eventually have his ten pieces, Sher Jan waited cheerfully until I had drawn the best morsels of mutton and balls of rice from the pot. He even growled out a song about the fragrant wine of Kandahar and the fine figures of the *lulis*, the dancing girls.

The next morning, while we climbed out of the gullies, past cliffs of veined limestone, I meditated upon the Valley of Thieves. The raiders had taken only part of the spoil they might have had. In my land, the riders of the clans would strip a stranger's caravan, but leave untouched the goods and animals of a friend. These Hazaras acted otherwise, and I thought that they were only one of many bands serving one leader. Verily, the mountains that rose, snowcapped, to the north of us might have sheltered many armies!

I was at the gate of the Mogul's empire, but what a cold and windy gate it was! Hugging his sheepskins about him, Sher Jan grinned at me.

"Only think, my lord, tonight we will walk in the alleys and look at the dancing girls, who have moon faces and sheep's eyes."

He hurried on the camels, muttering to them of grape leaves and grass that they would feed upon that evening; he shouted out blessings on the horsemen and merchants we met coming down the trail, and he swore that he had brought me safely out of the desert—I, who had been born in the *sahra*. All fear had left him, and when the valley became shallow and the red rock walls drew far apart, he ran up a ridge and beckoned me.

"Now, my lord, approaches the hour of ease and profit. Look!"

Eh, what my eyes beheld was pleasant as an oasis after the sand glare and dust of the track. We stood at the edge of a wide and lofty plain, set with fruit gardens and water ditches and the yellow walls of villages. Lines of vineyards rose against the nearest hills, and pomegranate bushes with their dark, shining leaves nearly hid the water ditches. We splashed through the ford of a gentle river, and I beheld at the northern edge of the plain the domes and minarets of a city above a gray scum of leafless poplars. And above the roofs of the city towered the foundations and lofty walls of the *kasr*—the citadel.

I saw distant camel and mule caravans

going toward the gates of Kandahar, and I thought that indeed it was a good place, a strong place, one to bring power to its master.

Sher Jan made all haste, but his beasts were weak from lack of food, and the plain was wide. Not until after the hour of evening prayer did we arrive at the nearest gate and find it closed for the night. Sher Jan swore and then besought me to go with him to the Armenian village by the river, outside the walls. It was, he said, the order of the governor that the gates should not be opened after sunset. The governor was a cautious man, and Kandahar a frontier city, perched above the dominion of the Iranis, through which we had come.

W'allahi, our road was ended. No longer did I need the guidance of Sher Jan. I told him that I would go and seek for Arabs, who are to be found on every caravan road, and always outside the walls.

ASKING first of one person, then of another, I learned that some Bedouins had their tents out on the road toward Ind, where they could graze their sheep and cattle. There I dismounted and gave the mare into the hands of the youths who came out of the black goatskin tents to greet me. Many times had I fought Bedouin raiders in the *sahra*; but here in a strange land we were as friends, and the blind chieftain of the band sent out and had a sheep killed in my honor, and his men thronged in to talk with me.

They heaped up the fire and filled the largest copper dish with the feast of mutton and rice, murmuring their pleasure when I ate heartily. We sipped many bowls of coffee. When the great bowl had been sent out to the women and the children and the dogs, we rested at ease on the rug.

The blind chieftain said that every year they journeyed from the hill country of Persia with horses, selling them in Kandahar.

"Dost thou pay road tribute to the tribes?" I asked, thinking of the Valley of Thieves.

"Yea, Daril of Athir. And when we are

within Kandahar we again pay road tax to the guards of the Mogul."

"But the guards do not keep the road clear." I told him of my meeting with the Hazaras.

"Will dogs keep off a wolf pack?" He shook his head. "Nay, the Pathans of these hills rob where they will."

"Yet taking only a small part."

"That is their custom and they obey the order given them."

"By the governor of Kandahar?"

The blind man bared his yellow teeth and drew nearer, until his head touched my shoulder.

"By God, the chieftain in Kandahar is no man for war. The Pathans obey a stronger."

"That must be the shah." I had heard tales of the might of Abbas, Lord of Persia.

"Nay, they obey a voice." The master of the tent mused awhile. "A loud and clear voice, calling to war and plunder. Some of my men have heard it, up yonder." He motioned with his head toward the hills. "That is why we linger here, to learn what the voice of al Khimar will command."

Indeed, al Khimar was a name to rouse the desert men—a name with memories of dark hours and great slaying. Al Khimar, The Veiled One. Once a woman had been called that, and again a prophet in Khorassan—a false prophet.

"He has spoken to the tribes," said a youth, coming to sit by me, "promising many things and foretelling that which has already happened."

Yea, that is the manner of prophets, to promise and foretell, and to rouse a following. Verily, in elder ages there had been some who talked with God, and since then many who lied and stirred up strife. But these Bedouins were full of mystery.

"Nay, Daril," they cried when I said naught. "This is no common man; he eats not at all, nor does he sleep. Only at times does he appear at his place. At other times nothing living is to be seen there."

"In one thing he hath shown his power,"

grunted the blind man, "for the tribes, the Hazaras and Baluchis and Yuzufis and all the Pathans, all obey him and do not harm each other."

"He told them to look for the coming of the great caravan bringing cotton and indigo and silver, and in the next moon it came," put in another.

"And many muleloads of silver did the tribes take from that caravan," added a third Bedouin, twisting his nose with his fingers, while the man of the tent sighed. It was clear to me that they envied the people of these mountains, who were guided to plunder by a truthful prophet.

"Why do they call this man al Khimar?" I asked, not wishing to mock them.

"Because he is veiled. From eyes to shoulders he wears a veil of thin white silk."

"Then ye have seen him?"

The Bedouins exchanged glances. They knew me for a wayfarer and an Arab, still they hesitated to say what they had seen of al Khimar. One at last admitted that he had been visiting the tribes in the hills above the town, when al Khimar had appeared among them. It seemed that this prophet kept himself in a certain gorge or valley, to which there was only one entrance. Hither went the people seeking him, sometimes finding him among his rocks, sometimes not. Yet no one had ever seen him leave the gorge. The Bedouins swore by the triple oath that no food was taken him, nor had he been known to eat. They who had beheld him said that he had a clear voice—far carrying as a muezzin's cry.

"His eyes!" cried one, "oh, his eyes! They burn with dark fire."

"What is hidden," assented the youth eagerly, "his eyes see. How else would he have known of the coming of that great caravan bearing silver?"

"All this is strange," grumbled the blind chieftain, who was old and irritable. "Is not a prophet a man? How can a man live up yonder with the eagles, without a fire, in such cold? Surely he eats."

"Nay," his followers cried at him, "it is a barren place, and he will accept no

offerings of fruit or grain or any food. We have seen."

"What thinkest thou, Lord Daril?" growled the chieftain. "These boys of mine are foolish as foals not yet licked dry. They go from me and come back with tales."

Indeed the Bedouins are wild folk, inclined to run after whatever takes their fancy. Instead of going back with the money they had gained from the sale of the horses, they lingered here among a strange people, filling their ears with the talk of a veiled prophet.

"In what language does al Khimar speak?" I asked, unwilling to show open doubt.

"In the speech of the Pathans."

"As one born to it, or as one who has accustomed himself to it?" I asked again.

"Verily, as one born."

Almost I laughed at them, for the harsh speech of the Pathans, bearded men shouting among their rocks, was little known to the Arabs, and how could they judge of it? Their zeal inflamed their minds, and to argue with them would only rouse them to anger.

"O men of the tent," I assured them, "I grant thy prophet is no common man. Still, a Pathan is as full of tricks as a dog of fleas."

"Al Khimar hath no need of trickery," muttered the youth who wore the cloak and girdle of a warrior. His beadlike eyes peered at me from between twisted plaits of dark hair. "Fortunate indeed, Lord Daril, art thou, that thou drewest not the sword against the followers of al Khimar. For those who pay not the tribute he slays swiftly."

In this manner we were gossiping, lying at ease, until the blind man should dismiss his followers and allow me to sleep. Being blind, he hungered for more talk, and the night hours passed until a herd boy rode up, calling out that riders were coming up the road toward Kandahar.

A BEDOUIN drew back the entrance curtain of the tent, and we saw lanterns moving among the trees, and heard a man singing. The clear voice carried

far in the cold air, and I knew it to be a trained voice, a minstrel's. When we saw mules laden with packs, and servants walking beside them, the Bedouins who had grasped their spears and bows lay back at ease again. Travelers with lights and luggage could not be raiders, looking for cattle to lift or tents to ride down and plunder.

"By my head!" swore the youth of the braids. "These are men of the Mogul."

When the first riders came abreast our tent they halted, and the singer ceased his chant. A black stallion, reined in by a strong hand, stalked up to the embers of our fire, and a cloaked figure scanned us.

"Peace be upon ye," a deep voice greeted us.

"And upon thee be the peace," responded the blind man.

"How far to the gate of Kandahar?"

"An hour of slow riding." The old Bedouin began to be curious, because the stranger, though not an Arab, had spoken in full voiced Arabic. "O my lord, there is no good in going forward, because all the gates are closed at sunset and they would not open to the Mogul himself."

The stranger mused a moment.

"Is that done by order of the governor?"

"Yea, by his order."

"Thou hast water in this place?"

"Indeed, enough for all thy beasts."

Blind the Bedouin chieftain was, but he had learned to judge of what happened near him by sound, and he guessed there were twenty to thirty animals with the travelers. I, using my eyes, judged that there were three nobles and six servants and twenty warriors in the escort, with two or three mule drivers. By the number of soldiers and the few servitors, I thought the strangers were officers. Indeed, that was the case, because the rider of the black stallion turned his head, speaking a brief order, and the followers began to off-load the mules and set up small pavilion tents in the meadow across the road, while the armed retainers dismounted and looked to their horses. The boys of our tents ran to bring water.

"O my lord," cried the blind man, "thou who speakest our speech should take food and sleep within this tent. Verily, I am honored this night with two guests. By what name may I greet thee?"

Before any one could answer, a slender noble came to the fire—a man whose crimson cloak was lined with down, whose girdle gleamed with gold thread, who swaggered with head high, his loosely knotted silk turban clasped with a single great emerald.

"Know ye not, O men of the tents," he cried in broken Arabic, "that I am Kushal, the songmaker? As to this lord, my companion, bring me wine and I shall tell you who he is."

Kushal's fine voice was that of the minstrel who had been singing up the road. The Bedouins stared, because his white tunic under the cloak was spotted with fresh blood. His young face seemed pallid, though his clear eyes sparkled with mischief. Some one brought him a jar of wine, muttering that it had been taken from a Persian *kafila* and not tasted until now. Kushal laughed and poured himself out a goblet, emptying it down his throat with a toss of his wrist.

"My companion—" he nodded toward the rider of the stallion who was talking in the road with the warriors—"is an officer of the Padishah, the emperor, the Mogul."

"May God grant him fortune in his service," responded the old Bedouin courteously.

"Stay," cried the songmaker, "thou hast not heard his name. He is Mahabat, lord of ten thousand horse."

While Kushal poured himself another gobletful and drank, the blind chieftain frowned, responding briefly—

"May his honor be increased."

"There is more to hear," grinned Kushal. "He is Mahabat Khan, the most trusted general of the emperor." And he filled his third goblet.

"Mahabat Khan, the sword of the Mogul!" cried the Bedouin, suddenly angry. "Nay—" he caught my arm—"take

the wine from this loud talker, or after another drink he will swear that his companion is the prophet of God!"

Verily, the Bedouin thought the minstrel mocked his blindness. Kushal laughed a ringing laugh, heedless of the restlessness of the men in the tent. I rose from my place, but the rider of the stallion strode out of the darkness among us. In dress he was somber beside the gleaming songmaker; his dark cloak and silver inlaid mail bore no mark of distinction; his gray *pugri* had neither heron feather nor jewel, yet his sword had a rare hilt of goldworked ivory.

All this I saw in the first glance and knew that this man needed no ornament to mark him a chieftain. The thin, wide lips; the lean, dark head, with its hawk's beak, revealed at once passion and the iron will that controlled it; his straight back and supple limbs spoke of strength restrained. He came almost silently among us in his riding boots of soft leather. His dark eyes, brilliant under rugged brows, had the fire of untamed daring. *W'allahi*, this was a man to listen to and to follow!

Without impatience or annoyance he looked at Kushal, who stilled his laughter, and at the Bedouins who had grasped their weapons and risen from their places. For an instant his glance weighed me and passed on.

"Since when," he reproved the minstrel, "has it been thy wont to mock affliction?"

Now Kushal's mirth held no guile. He had been amused when the Bedouins took the goblet from him. Yet he had not understood that the shaikh was blind, that the old man had intended no jest. As for the anger of the others, he seemed more than ready to welcome a quarrel. Yet he bandied no words with his companion.

"Thy pardon, O shaikh," he said quickly to the old man. "Verily, by God, a stranger beholding thee and hearing thy speech doth not deem thee afflicted!"

A little mollified by the compliment, the blind man muttered—

"Eh, thou wert not born in the tents,

songmaker." He turned his head toward the man in the gray turban. "And thou, who art thou in truth?"

"The son of Ghayur of the northern hills."

"Then thou art Mahabat Khan." Hastily the blind chieftain rose, calling at his followers impatiently. "O fools! O sons of dogs, ye have blackened my face with dishonor. Ye have eyes and saw not that this lord should be greeted as a guest. Go and kill a sheep and prepare the dish again. Leave the tent!"

Startled and protesting, the Bedouins laid aside their weapons and went forth to cook another feast. Most of them were children and grandchildren of the gray chieftain, and endured insults from him that would have been cause for a blood feud from the lips of another. The chieftain groped about until he caught the hand of Mahabat Khan, then led him to a seat on the carpet beside him, feeling to make sure that a saddle properly covered with a rug lay ready for the arm of his distinguished guest.

"I am Abu Ashtar the Blind," he said, "and verily this is a joyful night that brings to me the leader of a hundred thousand swords."

For Mahabat Khan to have declined his hospitality would have been a great disappointment to Abu Ashtar, who anticipated hours of pleasant talk with a distinguished guest who could speak Arabic fluently. Although he must have been road weary and, as we learned presently, had been involved in a skirmish that afternoon, Mahabat Khan sat by the old chieftain, drinking the tea and coffee brought by the Bedouin youths and sending away his own attendants who came after a while to seek him.

Listening to their talk, I came to know that he was a Pathan born, who had sought service with the Mogul as a youth. Abu Ashtar had heard of his deeds, reciting battles unknown to me, and conquests of strange lands. Now in this winter Mahabat Khan desired to see his own people again. He had started off at once, taking only a small following and Kushal.

And when Abu Ashtar asked it, the minstrel sang to us, low voiced. He also was a Pathan, no more than a youth. The blood on his tunic had not yet turned dark, and his left arm seemed to be injured; for he would not touch the guitar slung upon his shoulder, yet the magic of his voice was such that we listened greedily while he sang of his deeds in one battle and another, and always of the glory of the Pathans.

He was a youth of fierce pride and heedlessness—a spirit that could no more keep out of trouble than an unleashed hawk out of the air. He boasted often of his skill with the bow and the sword, and yet was master of neither weapon. In battle his recklessness made him dangerous to his foes and himself, for he seldom escaped without a wound. It was a miracle that he still lived—a miracle, indeed, that he liked to sing about. A loyal friend, and an enemy greatly to be feared.

Hearing from Abu Ashtar that I was a physician, Mahabat Khan requested me to treat a sword cut on the minstrel's arm. Kushal drew back his cloak and showed me a slash running from his elbow joint through the muscles of his forearm—the wound that had soiled his garments.

After I had drawn off the hastily knotted bandage, I washed it and heated in the embers a broken spear head that lay in the tent. With this I seared the cut, Kushal smiling at me and praising my skill to show that he heeded not the pain, even while his face blanched. Then I dressed it with oil and bound it up again. With his good hand Kushal slipped a silver chain from his wrist and offered it to me.

"Nay," I said at once, "we are guests of Abu Ashtar, and shall I take payment for easing thy hurt?"

"Why not?" he smiled, and added, "perhaps the gift should be gold instead of silver."

He meant that I might have been offended because he offered too little. When I assured him I would take no reward, he laughed.

"By my head, Daril, thou'lt never go

far at the Mogul's court. There the greatest physicians ask the biggest prices."

He told me how he had the wound. That afternoon Mahabat Khan's cavalcade had been stopped by a band of Hazaras who demanded a road toll.

"I told him that the roads were God's," the minstrel cried, "and they responded that we should taste of woe if we paid not the toll. Then swords were drawn and many were slashed on our part and their's, and the man who gave me this was carried off without his arm."

"Then ye have beaten off one of al Khimar's bands," I cried, glad that men had been found bold enough to stand against these robbers.

Mahabat Khan glanced at me questioningly, and I told him what had befallen me in the Valley of Thieves, adding much that I had since heard in Abu Ashtar's tent. The Pathan lord listened intently and said gravely that he had heard of a veiled prophet in the hills.

"But not a tax gathering prophet," laughed Kushal.

Mahabat Khan asked the old Bedouin if the governor of Kandahar had not armed strength enough to put an end to such exactions.

"His strength is like a camel's," responded Abu Ashtar with a grunt, "good for work in the alleys and the plain, but no good for climbing mountains. *Bism'allah!* When the governor sends horsemen after the raiders they catch no one; when he sends search parties into the upper gorges they find no one. When he patrols the roads, the men of al Khimar wait until the merchants go forth or come a second time and then take thrice the toll, so that travelers take pains to pay the price to the Veiled One without delay."

"And if they pay not?"

Abu Ashtar shook his head.

"At first some merchants who did not pay were put to death in their houses in Kandahar. The men of the Veiled One come and go unseen. Since then no one has refused, until thy coming. As to thee, who knows? Thy great name may safeguard thee, and perhaps al Khimar will

content himself with slaying one of thy men."

"If he does that," swore Kushal, "he will have made a blood enemy of Mahabat Khan and ye will see the Veiled One torn out of his rocks. Mahabat Khan does not suffer a man of his to be slain, unavenged."

EH, IT was a little matter, the talk of that evening in the tent of the Bedouins—the compassion of the Pathan general upon the blind man who made two feasts in one night for unexpected guests. Yet I had reason to remember the talk.

In Kushal I gained a friend. When Mahabat Khan withdrew to sleep, the minstrel insisted I should come to his own tent, a comfortable place well strewn with carpets and robes. Thither the next day while Kushal still slept, after the midday meal had been brought us, came one who cried my name loudly.

"Lord Daril! Fortune awaits thee."

This was Sher Jan, my camel driver, and I cursed him for making a tumult in the camp of the strangers.

"Nay, thou'lt bless me when I have told thee the reason for my coming, O my lord. The most splendid of reasons. I swear to thee by all the holy names that I have not ceased to labor for thee in the last night. I proclaimed thy skill in the streets and taverns, and this morning a servant sought me with a message. There is no other physician worth his price in Kandahar."

This was not strange, because Persians skilled in medicine were more apt to attach themselves to some powerful noble or prince of a reigning family than to shut themselves up in a frontier town. And Arab physicians are much sought after.

"The message is written," continued Sher Jan with broad satisfaction, "and I have it in my girdle. The servant wore clean linen and gave me—" he swallowed hard and twisted his words—"directions how to reach the house where there is need of thee. And that is not all."

He grinned and stooped down to my head.

"By God, the summons is from a *hanim*!"

He meant either a wife of a noble or a daughter, and this pleased me little. For the hardest work of a physician is in visiting the women behind the curtain. In my land, where my name was known, the Arabs let me look upon the faces and at need the bodies of their sick daughters. But in Persia I had been forced to judge the health of an ailing woman by feeling the pulse in the arm she thrust through a curtain, and by a few questions.

I looked at the missive Sher Jan drew forth—a tiny square of scented paper bearing a few words written in a skilled hand.

Greeting to the Arab *hakim*. An afflicted woman hath need of thee and reward for thee.

"Why was not the summons from the lord of the house?" I asked, wondering.

"By the Ka'aba!" observed Kushal, sitting up on his rug. "Thou art the first man, Daril, to ask that when a fair *hanim* summons thee."

Our talk had roused him, and he stretched his good arm out for the paper. When he had read it he laughed.

"Allah, what more canst thou wish?"

"Lord Daril," put in Sher Jan, gazing at the minstrel approvingly, "the servant said that his mistress was alone, without the men of her family."

Then, surely, she was a singing girl or public dancer, for otherwise she would be guarded. Still, the servant or Sher Jan or both might be lying.

"What is the matter with her?" I asked.

The camel driver lifted his hands and shook his head.

"O my lord, what does that matter? Anyway, she is very beautiful and it is certain thou wilt receive many times the ten pieces of silver. Remember—"

"Be still, brother of a dog!"

But it was not easy to silence Sher Jan's tongue. The witless man had determined to see me earn the silver that he thought I owed him and had cried my skill through all Kandahar. Probably he had been given some money, to find me.

"Remember, my lord," he whispered

loudly, "to reward thy follower. Take care to make the affliction seem to be a great one requiring many visits and blood letting, and stiffen thy price thereby."

"Wait, I will not delay thee long, Daril," cried Kushal, calling for his servant. "I must change these soiled things for better ones before approaching a *hanim*."

"Thou!"

"No help for it. Mahabat Khan is talking politics with the governor, and I must escort thee."

While he spoke he helped his man put clean linen on his slender figure, until he stood garbed in rose pink brocade that heightened the color of the great emerald in his white headgear. Then he put on an embroidered coat with sleeves and collar edged with soft sable, and around his waist he wrapped a green and gold girdle, taking care to leave the coat open at his breast to show the fine brocade beneath. Then he washed his face and hands in water scented with attar of rose and slipped his feet into pearl sewn riding slippers. *W'allahi*, never had I seen such a splendid youth! I could not help looking down at my dull black headcloth and heavy brown mantle and dust stiffened sandals, while Sher Jan walked around the minstrel, grunting his amazement and satisfaction at this elegance.

I told Kushal that I had need of no escort and that he was clad for an audience at court rather than a visit to a sick woman and that, in any case, he would not be admitted to the presence of the *hanim*.

"If she is really beautiful," he smiled, "I will admit myself; if she is ugly I will go off without troubling you."

Eh, there was no checking him. On a freshly groomed white charger he galloped all the way to Kandahar, putting my fleet footed mare to her best paces. He offered to buy the mare of me and, when I refused, to cast dice for both horses. At the gate of the mud wall where some Mogul soldiery lounged, he reined in until they scrambled up to salaam to him, thinking him a grandee of Ind.

Perforce, we had to wait for Sher Jan and his follower, who had done their best to keep up with us, without avail. They were far down the road. This interval of quiet the minstrel spent in gazing at the bare ridges to the north, red bulwarks against the blue of the sky.

"Those mountains are like sleeping lions, Daril," he said under his breath.

The tawny masses did have the shape of crouching beasts, and Kandahar itself stretched up toward them along a ridge, as if one of the lions had thrust a paw down into the plain. Outside the gray mud wall were endless orchards and hamlets of many people, Tajiks, Jews, Baluchis—the followers of the caravan track.

Inside the wall the city rose, tier above tier, crowning the summit of the ridge, to the yellow stone citadel where the banner of the Mogul rose and fell in the wind gusts.

Sher Jan came up, beating his nag—that he had borrowed or stolen in the night—and led us through the crowds and dust and kneeling camels of the marketplace, crying out to clear a path for us. Then he turned up the street that led toward the citadel. It was so steep that stone steps had been built at places, a dirt path being left for the horses. But Kushal urged his white charger up the stairs, mocking me when I did not follow.

Not until we were within arrow shot of the gate of the governor's castle did Sher Jan halt and peer at the walls of houses and courtyards that lined the street solidly on either hand. He quested about, and knocked at the wooden gate of a court.

The portals opened at once, without question or the barking of dogs. Sher Jan drew back, suspicious at this silence, but Kushal swung his horse aside from the steps and paced in.

A dozen armed men, who might have been Gipsies or Baluchis, stared steadily at his magnificent figure. They were lying around a fire, shivering under leafless poplars, even in the sun, for the winds of Kandahar came out of snow filled gorges. Kushal greeted them, and one stepped forward to hold his horse. The one door

of the white house behind the poplars opened and a bearded Persian came and stared in his turn from the minstrel to me. Seeing Sher Jan, his face cleared and he hastened to my stirrup, bidding me dismount and enter. But he would not allow Kushal to accompany me, and the minstrel kept his saddle.

I followed the bearded keeper of the door through a corridor and up a winding stair that ended in a curtain. Here, as if she had been listening for our steps, a young slave appeared out of a niche.

"The *hakim*—the *hakim* of Arabistan," explained he of the beard, and the veiled girl giggled when she salaamed, slipping through the curtain and beckoning me to follow.

The Persian folded his arms and took his stand at the head of the stair, as if to show me that he would stay there until I left.

I parted the curtain and went forward, feeling beneath my toes the richness of a fine carpet. Into my nostrils crept the scent of rose leaves and of the incense that smoldered within a copper jar before me.

The only light came from a round, heavily latticed window by the far corner, and the sun's rays, coming through the lattice, pierced dimly the hanging wreaths of smoke. Near at hand I heard the fluttering of birds, the whirr of wings and tiny scrape of claws.

"The carpet will not harm thee, O shaikh! Sit, and fear not."

The voice was young and amused and so low that I barely heard the words above the stir of the hidden birds and splashing of a fountain.

"Nay, not there; here in the sun," it said.

So I seated myself under the window, drawing my mantle about me, and the speaker seemed to find more food for amusement in that.

"What is this? An old gray eagle! I thought thee a physician. Nay, thy manners smack of the tents, and thy sword is an omen of blood, and thy face is that of a father of battles."

"Can the eye of youth," I asked, "dis-

cern the wisdom of age? Judge thou whether I have a physician's skill or no."

By now I could see a couch under the round aperture, and upon the couch the outstretched form of a girl whose slender feet within touch of my hand were white as jasmine, whose ankles were bound with bracelets of flashing sapphires. Her head, unveiled, was no more than a shadow, beneath the smoke clouded sunbeams. And yet the shadow seemed to be tipped with gold.

"But all physicians," she cried, "act in a manner that is not thine. Nay, they bow to earth and come forward with ready compliments and rare promises."

"No doubt they were Persians," I said and she laughed a little, for she spoke in the Persian manner, and boldly, as if she were a woman who knew how to command men.

"Wilt thou cure me by burning or by letting blood or by purging?" she asked.

"What troubles thee?"

She mused a space and said gravely that sleep would not come to her, and sometimes her eyes pained her.

"Stretch forth thy hand," I bade her.

I pressed my fingers upon the artery in her slender wrist. In leaning forward her head came more into the light, and I saw that her hair was yellow as sunburned wheat. And the touch of her skin was cool and moist, the beat of the pulse as true and mild as the drip of the fountain. I withdrew my hand.

"Thine eyes," I asked, "let me see them."

"The light pains them," she murmured, keeping in her shadow, and beginning all at once to chatter like a parrot aroused.

She questioned me as to my travels, and the road to Kandahar, and whether I had been robbed. To this I made answer that I had been captive to the Persians, and she clapped her hands, summoning the slave girl who brought sherbet, cold and sweet, and dates, full flavored and good, like the dates of my land. I thought of Kushal, sitting impatient below, and smiled.

"*Hanim*," I said before tasting her of-

fering. "I can do naught for thee. Thy health is good, and to my thinking all that ails thee is curiosity."

Once or twice before I had been summoned by women who had grown weary of confinement behind curtain and veil—who could go forth only to the mosque and the bath, and wished to hear talk of the world. In the shadow under the incense smoke her eyes dwelt upon me, whether amused or angry I could not know. I was ill pleased to be summoned thus at the whim of a girl, and the insistence of a camel driver; and yet, shameless though she must be, because unveiled, there was charm in the music of her voice.

"O father of battles," she said reprovingly, "thy hand is more accustomed to the sword hilt than the lancet. I am weary for my land and feverish with longing for my mountains, the snow mountains by the Sea of the Eagles."

Verily, such longing can be no less than fever, and I too longed at times for the bare *sahra* and its clear night skies. Because it seemed to me that she had spoken the truth, and because I was partaking of her salt and perhaps because I wished to keep Kushal out in the courtyard where he could not stir up any mischief, I talked with her, answering the murmur of her questions.

She told me her name was Nisa. She was a Circassian, born in the mountain land of Persia, a singer who wandered from city to city. For months she had been pent up in Kandahar, because she feared to take the road down into Ind, where the riders of al Khimar might despoil her of possessions or carry her off.

She asked me about my capture by the pasha, and I told her the truth—that I had seen this pasha, the ambassador of the great shah of Persia, slain in a hill tower, and the gifts he was escorting into Ind scattered among thieving Kurds. Then she asked me if I had seen any nobles of the shah hunting near the frontier.

"I shall go back," she cried softly, "if I can find protection upon the road. Kan-

dahar is full of merchants and hillmen and I am weary of it."

"Would the shah's nobles hunt in winter?" I made response.

"Yea, if the whim came to them."

I told her I had passed only one camp, at a distance, where I had seen Persian Red Hat soldiery and many horses, doubtless the frontier guards.

And then Kushal made himself heard. A guitar struck the first light notes of melody, and he sang—I knew not what. Nisa grew silent at once, and I thought that she must have watched us from the window, because she made no effort to look out to see who the minstrel might be.

But the song had the rush of galloping hoofs and the ripple of laughter and the harsh notes of anger, and when I rose and looked through the lattice, I beheld Kushal on his white horse among the warriors of the courtyard. They were sitting, agape, grinning and listening with all their ears.

It was a Pathan love song, this—a thing of fire and grief and passion, and the warriors enjoyed it. When Kushal ceased and bent his head over the guitar and adjusted its strings, Nisa whispered a question.

"Who is the young lord?"

I told her that he was a minstrel of Mahabat Khan's, and she rose to her knees to watch him, the sunlight coming full against her face for the first time. *W'allahi*, it was my turn to stare!

Unveiled, clouded with pale gold tresses penned beneath a silver fillet, her eyes dark as pools at night, her lips small and fine as the seal of a signet ring, what a face it was! Too young for richness of beauty, too impulsive for peace of mind—it was the face of a child of *peristan*, of elfland, wilful and careless and still tender.

And that moment Kushal chose to ride up under the window. Perhaps he could see her through the lattice or perhaps he heard her whisper, for his ears were keen as his wits and his head was no more than a lance length from the opening.

Nay, she did not complain then of the

sun glare or of aching eyes, for she pressed close to the wooden fretwork, and Kushal surely beheld her face. An instant he stared, his fingers fumbling the guitar, then he smiled and salaamed, crying—

"The praise to God who created fair women!" Musing a moment he put his thought into song, choosing a lilting Persian melody, thus:

"Swords are sharpened for a blow,
Tresses perfumed for a lover—
Everything is created so,
Is it, or not?"

Nisa, resting on a slender arm, cuddled down to listen, and the slave girl clapped her hands soundlessly.

"Eyes were given me to see
Maiden's beauty. Thus, I fancy,
Everything was made to be—
Was it, or not?"

Not once did the songmaker seem to remember the armed henchmen at his back, nor did he once falter for a word.

"Lips were given thee to kiss
And banish sorrow. Nay, thou sayest,
'Everything was made for this!'
Was it, or not?"

The slave girl was sighing with admiration, but Nisa chose to laugh—a soft trill that provoked and mocked, not less melodiously than Kushal's song. Kushal's eyes lighted at the sound.

"Open the casement," Nisa ordered her woman, and when this was done, she turned at once to look back at me. "Verily, Lord Daril, thy companion resembles a peacock in splendor and in self conceit, and his voice is as harsh as a peacock's."

Now Kushal's improvised song had been put in a Persian measure, and was not to be compared to his native chants, but often I had seen a minstrel rewarded with a jeweled bracelet for less than that, by a pleased patron. Of course, Nisa being a woman, a reward was the last thing he expected.

"Throw him a coin," Nisa whispered quite distinctly to her maid. "Nay, not gold—silver."

Naturally the slave girl giggled and, after a moment's search, a silver dirhem

was tossed from the casement by the maid. Kushal's face darkened and he sat rigid in the saddle, his eyes fastened upon Nisa's face.

"Close the casement," she whispered, glancing from beneath long lashes at the motionless minstrel.

Although I was not ill pleased to behold Kushal's pride touched, I had seen enough of the girl's pranks.

"Thou hast my leave to depart," she said idly, and slipped from the couch to accompany me to the curtain, which was strange.

Here we met the bearded steward in argument with one of the warriors of the courtyard, and they both looked unhappy when they saw their mistress.

"What is upon you?" she asked at once.

The armed retainer squirmed and held out a closed fist.

"*Ai, hanim*, a message from the lord who sang, he of the white horse."

"What, then?"

"These words, 'The gift of Kushal Kattack, who has many times bestowed a diamond for a glimpse of a fair face.'"

The slender Circassian brushed back the tangle of her tresses and held out her hand. The man opened his fingers reluctantly and yielded up a single copper coin.

"This was his gift."

Nisa's left hand flew toward his girdle, as if to grasp the hilt of a dagger, and the messenger shrank back. Then, looking amused, she let the copper piece roll down the stair and waved the two servitors to follow it. They went gladly, and I thought that she had made them fear her anger before now.

Verily, by pretending that she had appeared at the casement for a price, Kushal had matched her treatment of him—and he had not stopped to think that we were shut up with a dozen of the Circassian's armed followers. When she dismissed the maid, after the two men, I began to watch for a storm.

"Art thou his friend?" she asked in a whisper.

I pondered, and nodded. For a night I

had dwelt in his tent, sharing his salt.

She looked at me searchingly, and twice seemed to check the words that rose to her lips. Seldom will a woman do thus.

"Then bear him this message—to him alone. Warn him thus, 'If Kushal abides in Kandahar a week he will meet the hour of his death.'"

She spoke impatiently and so softly that I barely caught the words. As to me, she said naught, and I went from her presence wondering. If he had offended her, why should she delay taking vengeance upon him? If she had reason to fear for him, why did she not summon him up and warn him herself? It seemed likely enough that Kushal had enemies in Kandahar—and everywhere.

When we had rid ourselves of Sher Jan, outside the courtyard gate, I gave him Nisa's message, and he smiled.

"No doubt she would like to see me run, as a jackal flees a lion's den."

"As to that I know not, and God alone knows what is behind a woman's words. After all, she is a singing girl, without shame."

To my surprise he turned upon me fiercely.

"*Allah kerim!* Thou liest, Daril! Those eyes—" He meditated, with an inward struggle. "True, she is without shame, knowing not its meaning. She is a child, untaught."

"She said she was a singing girl, and she meets men unveiled."

"I thought thee wiser, Daril. I'll wager my horse and purse she knows no more evil than that pigeon."

He pointed up at a blue pigeon that had swept down out of the west, circling above the poplars. Fluttering, it dropped out of sight upon the roof of Nisa's dwelling. In the clear, level sunlight of late afternoon I caught the flash of silver upon one of its claws.

"A messenger pigeon," I laughed, but Kushal frowned.

"Why did she summon thee?" he asked moodily.

"To question me and amuse herself; nay, she has mocked us."

Kushal glanced again at the blank white wall of the house and reined forward savagely. While we had been idling in this fashion at the Circassian's, the followers of Mahabat Khan had moved forward into Kandahar, taking up quarters in a large house offered the Khan by the governor, who had not known until this day of the coming of the foremost soldier of Ind. To this house Kushal now made his way, saying nothing at all.

And here I would have parted from him, to go back to the Arabs' camp, had not one of the troopers of Mahabat Khan galloped forth to meet us.

"*Hai*, for an hour the order of Mahabat Khan has awaited thee, to go at once to him at the governor's hall!"

Kushal shook off his meditation and gathered up his reins.

"The Arab physician likewise," added the man.

His voice had a ring to it, and his eyes looked ominous. Beyond him, in the pomegranate garden of the dwelling other troopers walked about among their saddled horses, talking vehemently. I saw for the first time that these followers of Mahabat Khan were Rajput horsemen, warriors too proud of their own birth and worth to serve any lord of another race who was not a man of the utmost courage and as careful of honor as themselves. And at this moment they looked as if they wanted nothing more than to take to the sword and saddle.

"What has happened?" Kushal asked.

"Enough!" said the trooper, chewing his beard. "When the Sirdar—" in this fashion they named Mahabat Khan—"rode through the market place of this city, a man dressed as a pilgrim drew a *tulwar* and ran at him. Rai Singh, riding at the Sirdar's flank, saw him and spurred forward, taking the blow in his breast. Thus the man failed to do harm to our lord."

"Allah! And then?"

"The man of the *tulwar* fled through the bazaars, and we heard this cry, 'The stroke of al Khimar!' Who cried out, we know not. The Sirdar drove his horse

into the crowd, but the assassin escaped. Rai Singh died in these last moments, after the Sirdar had gone to the governor. Tell him so."

While we trotted toward the citadel the same thought came to both of us—that al Khimar had dared take vengeance for the skirmish of yesterday.

AT THAT time Baki the Wise was governor of Kandahar. Kwajah Baki, frugal and penny saving, a learned reader of books, a good man for accounts and management, who trusted no soothsayers, but studied the stars himself, making calculations of fortunate and evil days. Wise indeed he was, but too fearful to be a good soldier, though he was the son of a Pathan chieftain and a Persian mother.

We found his palace to be evidence of his peculiarity. The walls were bare of tapestries, the carpets were mended, the servants meanly dressed. Even the merchants and officers who awaited audience with him had come garbed in common stuffs, and the worn slippers that they left at the threshold were no better than my sandals.

And Baki himself we found not in the fountain garden nor in the tiled reception hall, but perched in the high round tower at the rear of the citadel, at a table covered with rolls of paper. We were escorted to this chamber, where Mahabat Khan nodded to us and spoke our names to the governor.

Baki had the large clear eyes and pale skin of the man who goes forth seldom into the sun. His black cotton tunic and loose red *khalat* seemed to make up in color what they lacked in ornament. He looked fixedly at Kushal's elegance and turned his back upon us, with a curt greeting.

"As to the wound of thy follower," he said to Mahabat Khan, resuming his conversation without heeding us, "that is one of the least of the injuries inflicted by al Khimar."

"Rai Singh is dead," remarked Kushal. Mahabat Khan glanced at him and nodded again, clasping his lean hands be-

tween his knees. Baki and he sat upon the low, carpet covered platform that ran around the wall, while Kushal and I stood before them, there being no fit sitting place on the clay floor of the governor's workroom.

"O Kwajah," said the Pathan Sirdar quietly, "thou has heard. My men will expect me to find the murderer."

"How?" asked Baki crisply. He had a keen mind and the gift of plain words. "By now the man who did it is hidden in any one of a hundred cellars. By nightfall he will be lowered over the city wall, on his way to the hills. Once there thou and I could search for a month and only see more men slain."

"Then he is from the tribes? He wore pilgrim's dress."

"So do a thousand others who journey from Ind to the shrines of Meshed and Mecca yearly. When al Khimar is pleased to murder in Kandahar, it is his whim to dress his swordsmen so."

Mahabat Khan called Baki's attention to us.

"This companion of mine was wounded in fighting off raiders yesterday, and this physician was robbed of his silver in a place called the Valley of Thieves, all within thy territory."

The governor pressed his thin lips together and thrust out his chin.

"*B'illah!* Hadst thou advised me of thy coming, Mahabat Khan, I would have sent two hundred troopers to escort thee."

"The fault is not thine," Mahabat Khan said grimly, "but the responsibility is thine."

"Nay," retorted Baki, "it is God's, who made hillmen—Pathans and Hazaras. Were the Veiled One in Kandahar I could scent him out and make an end of him. But he does not leave his gorge. Only his men wander in and out—excellent spies by all tokens, because they inform him of the coming of the caravans."

"Were any caught?"

Baki spread out his hands.

"Two were caught and accused by twenty witnesses. I tortured them and

put them to death thereafter, they swearing by the life of God that they knew naught of al Khimar. And the next day a message was dropped from the wall at my feet, saying that they had died speaking the truth and al Khimar knew them not."

Verily, he was a man of peace like myself, desiring quiet to finish his tablets of solar equations and movements of the moon.

"In the end," he said moodily, "it was clear to me that the twenty accusers were al Khimar's men, and the twain that I slew were enemies of his. In this fashion he cast dirt upon my beard."

"A prophet who sheds blood!" Kushal cried.

"Yea," assented the governor, "who sheds blood to clear the path he means to follow."

"And that path?" Mahabat Khan looked up.

"Leads to war. Promising war and loot, he is rousing the tribes of the hills." Suddenly Baki rose, drawing his heavy coat about his thin shoulders. "Come!"

He unlocked the narrow door behind his table, and a gust of wind whirled into the chamber. We followed him upon a spiral stair that led upward past embrasures to the roof of the tower. Whoever built this tower of the citadel had meant it for a lookout. A solid parapet, breast high, ran around it.

Leaning against this wall, our robes tossed by the buffeting of the icy wind, we could see all Kandahar and the fertile plain below. It was then the hour of early afternoon, after the third prayers.

"Look," cried Baki the Wise, "and you will see why al Khimar prevails against me."

Mahabat Khan was silent, his dark eyes running over every point of the citadel, as a chess player gazes at the men on the board, with thought for strength of attack and defense.

Indeed, this was a strong *kasr*, a fort to be held by few against many. On three sides a rocky ditch lay under the wall, which had been built of yellow stone, but-

tressed and sloping sharply upward four or five times the height of a man. The one large gate of black wood, ironbound and studded, was set in the maw of a squat tower. Instead of the usual litter of stables and stalls against the inner side of the wall, the space was clear to the inner citadel, also of solid stone, rising roof above roof toward this wind blasted tower.

And the tower sat back squarely against the soaring ridge of the mountain behind us. I could have cast a javelin against the rocky face of the mountain, with its gaping fissures and jagged pinnacles.

To right and left, clear in the glow of the evening sky, other arms of the mountains stretched down toward the dark line of poplars that marked the highway from Ind to Persia. A dozen shadow filled gorges led back to the upper slopes of the hills, and it was clear to me that raiders coming from the heights could choose their valley and strike and flee unharmed.

"Listen!" exclaimed Baki, shivering in his wraps.

Below the walls of the citadel all Kandahar was astir, perhaps aroused by the parties of Mogul guards who searched in vain for the murderer.

"*Ya hu—ya hak!*"

Beggars, scenting profit in the confusion, cried the louder, pulling at the horsemen and cursing those who beat them off. Dust rose about them like a veil, swirling up in the hot air that lurked in the alleys, smelling of camels and dirty cotton and burning dung. Women screamed down from the roofs, abuse mingled with praise and questions for all the world to hear.

"With three hundred men," said Baki, "I am given the duty of holding Kandahar and collecting the tax of the Mogul. Half my men are Pathans, cousins of the hill dogs, fire-eaters, who would like nothing better than to loot on their own account. The landholders in the plain will not support me, because they say I tax them too heavily. The wandering folk who have come down to camp here for the winter are more afraid of al Khimar than of me. Mahabat Khan, I watch, and I will hold

the fort if I am attacked. I have posted guards at the trail that leads to the devil's aerie. Here!"

He led us to the west side of the tower and, shading my eyes, I looked down into the haze of a bare ravine under the city wall at the gray river winding through its depths. On my right hand the ravine wound up into the hills, and a thin column of smoke showed where Baki's outpost camped by the river, within sight of the tower.

"That is well done," said Mahabat Khan gravely.

Baki peered at him curiously, no doubt wondering if the Sirdar meant to complain of him to the Mogul. In truth this was not the place for Baki, a man whose years had been passed in the academies, who craved solitude and was fearful of the unseen. A strong hand and a ready sword were needed to keep this mountain gate for the Mogul.

"There is a way to take the slayer of Rai Singh," went on the Pathan, and Baki shook his head, thinking he would be asked for men or money.

"How?" he asked.

"Write thou a summons to al Khimar, bidding him find the man and send him to thee, bound."

"For what price?"

"For no price; seal it with thy seal."

Baki and Kushal both looked at him to see if he jested, but Mahabat Khan led the way back to the cell-like chamber, and the governor wrote some words in Pushtu upon a paper.

"Who will take this, Mahabat Khan?" he asked, pausing.

"I will be responsible for that."

When he had signed his name, Baki rubbed some ink on a corner of the paper, and pressed his signet ring into the ink, then rolled up the missive and thrust it into a plain wooden tube.

"O Sirdar," he said, as he handed the tube to Mahabat Khan, "thy coming hath cast the torch of strife into the framework of my administration. Should harm befall thee, my trouble will be grief indeed. So I beg of thee to go upon thy

way, relating the plight of Kandahar at the court of our illustrious lord, the Emperor of Ind, so that aid may be sent me and my hand strengthened against these hill dogs."

"Aye," smiled the Pathan, "I will do that, after I have delivered the murderer of Rai Singh to my men."

Baki's eyes darkened, and his lips closed in a straight line. Verily, he knew his own mind and did not lack conviction.

"Art thou the Sirdar, conqueror of Bengal, victor in twenty battles, lord of twenty thousand horse, or the son of Ghayur, meddler in feuds and thievery?"

"Both," responded Mahabat Khan, pulling at his mustache. "O Baki, when an obligation is laid upon thee, dost thou put thy hand to its fulfillment or mount thy horse and ride away?"

Baki smote thin fists together, his slender body rigid as a lance shaft, under its poor and ill fitting clothes.

"By God, Mahabat Khan, it is my duty to hold Kandahar for the Emperor! And thou, riding at pleasure, art bound to anger al Khimar and give him the very pretense for war that he seeks!" He raised both fists over his head, struggling with anger. "At least, take care whom thou sendeth into the hills with this message, for al Khimar will send thee back his head and then thou wilt have two blood feuds on thy hands instead of one."

"Then will thy troubles be at an end."

So said the Pathan, rising to go forth, and I pondered the riddle of his words until we had mounted and left the citadel. Then I saw a little of what was in his mind, for he signed to me to come to his side.

"Daril, hast thou a mind to serve the Mogul?"

"Yea, my lord—as a physician."

He smiled fleetingly, white teeth flashing under his clipped mustache.

"Thou art not a man of ready promises. Good! Ride to the tents of Abu Ashtar, and lead him to me before the first hour of this night, with three of his men."

"They are Bedouins, serving no lord

For what reason shall I bid them come?"

"Ask if they wish to increase their honor."

"How?" I questioned, knowing that they would demand to be told.

Mahabat Khan was little accustomed to quibbling over a command, but he seemed to know the men of the tents.

"Bid them come, and learn. Shall I be feasted by Abu Ashtar and not kill a sheep for him?"

NOT WITH three Bedouins, but with eleven, did I come to Mahabat Khan's house in the second hour of that night. At first they had refused loudly, fearing both the walls and the guards of Kandahar, and doubtless with good reason, because of thefts committed by them in the past. But the Father of the Blind had the courage of his affliction, and it was a matter of honor to accept the Sirdar's invitation—of honor and good eating. When he had scolded his men for their fears and announced that he would go alone with me, they all began to think in another fashion and begged to come. Abu Ashtar rode a fine mare, with embroidered caparisoning and silk saddle cloth and fringed reins.

Kushal greeted him at the courtyard of the Sirdar's quarters and led him and his men to the fire, where a whole sheep was boiling. The songmaker explained that his master begged to be excused, as he was with the Rajputs in the chamber where the body of Rai Singh lay. Some of the Rajputs came forth presently and greeted us, taking no part in the feast, for they were Hindus. They seemed both restless and troubled, and Kushal was buried in his thoughts. But the servants brought forth many dishes, offering saffron and dates and sherbet with the mutton, and my companions stuffed themselves comfortably.

When we had licked clean our fingers, Kushal led us into the first room of the house. There, as we sat against the wall, I beheld in the dim light of a hanging lantern a tall Pathan striding back and forth. The step and the poise of the head

were familiar, and presently I knew him by his beaked nose and lean chin to be Mahabat Khan.

W'allahi, but he had changed more than his garments! His loose, soiled *pugri* with its hanging end, his long wool shirt and rusty chain mail, his baggy breeches bound to the knee with odds and ends of cloth, and his once splendid padded and embroidered coat—all these looked and smelled like those of a thieving hillman, and even the gold chain bearing some talisman at his throat, and the battered silver armlets were no more than evidence of plunder taken from a slain foeman. He walked like a man accustomed to stride over boulders and climb goat paths.

The keen eyes of the Bedouins recognized him; and they waited for him to speak.

"O Abu Ashtar," he said, "I asked only for three men—three who know the way to the den of al Khimar."

The blind chieftain muttered uneasily:

"We are horse traders, strangers in these hills. How should we know the paths?"

"The talk was otherwise in thy tent. I ask for three men to go with Daril and with me."

Even then I could not believe that Mahabat Khan meant to enter the hills. I thought he was playing a trick, and the Bedouins answered in chorus that they knew nothing of the veiled prophet and his people.

"Are ye al Khimar's men?" he said, smiling.

"Nay, lord. We are—"

"Choose ye the three who will go," he bade them. "Let Abu Ashtar choose. I ask for three to go up the river gorge, to point out the way to the *sangar*, and thereafter to watch our horses. No more than that; nor will any blame be upon them."

He went away then to talk with Kushal, and the Bedouins turned upon me, accusing me of betraying them. I had a moment to reflect and decided how to answer them.

"What is upon ye?" I cried. "This

Sirdar hath a feud with al Khimar. Think ye he will go into the hills and betray ye? Fear ye the river gorge or Baki's guards?"

"Nay, we fear the anger of the Veiled One."

But Abu Ashtar had been meditating, and now he announced suddenly that his men should go. It was better, he said, to obey the Sirdar. If all went well there would be a reward. The truth was that Abu Ashtar had realized that he himself would be held as a hostage by the Rajputs, and he scoffed loudly at the misgivings of the youths who, he said, were eager enough to slink off and listen to the prophet, but reluctant to earn something for him. So the youth with the lovelocks bethought him and offered to go with me, and likewise two of his companions.

Why did I go with the Sirdar? I had brought the Bedouins to Kandahar and I was responsible for the three men to Abu Ashtar. And then it was not easy to refuse Mahabat Khan, who had power to cast us into chains, but who asked no more of us than suited our minds. Eh, before the end came I watched him take command in truth; but that was not yet.

Only once that night did he use his authority, when we four reached the eastern gate of the city. He drew aside the officer of the guard, and presently the gate was opened—against Baki's order. I have often wondered what the Sirdar said to that man!

For a while we rode east, then circled through the outer camps, until we were heading west. So we reached the river far out from the wall and dropped into the path that wound toward the dark mouth of the gorge.

"*Sahib*," I said, drawing abreast Mahabat Khan, "this venture is not wise. There is peril for thee; and as for me, if thou art harmed, Baki will crucify me, and thy troopers will light a fire under my toes. If harm comes to the Bedouins, Abu Ashtar will make an end of me."

"Thou shalt go with me," he laughed.

"Whither?" I wondered. "To deliver the message to that prophet?"

"Perhaps."

"That is madness, for al Khimar cares naught for the power of the Mogul."

"Nay," he said, "it would be madness to hang about the streets of Kandahar after what has happened. Tell me, Daril, if thou wert riding upon an open road and an arrow sped against thee out of the brush, what would best be done? To ride on, or to turn thy horse swiftly into the brush?"

"To turn aside and hide, and then watch," I made answer.

"Aye," he said, "and that is what we shall do."

WHEN we drew near the outpost in the ravine, the Bedouins thought that the Sirdar would ride in boldly and make himself known; and that would be folly, if eyes were watching from the hills.

Instead, he turned off the path and climbed a ridge, bidding us dismount and warning me to take care that the mare did not whinny. He led us among boulders and bunches of camel thorn without hesitating, and I thought that he had marked this course from the tower that afternoon. The Bedouins moved almost silently beside their unshod beasts. The mutter of the river filled the ears of the guards beside the fire. Perhaps they heard us—once the pack pony stumbled heavily, and we waited, listening for a challenge, but I think they were content enough to stay by the road and keep their skins whole. A hundred men could have passed them as we did.

When the fire was too far behind to outline our figures, Mahabat Khan led us down again to the path and halted.

"Lead ye," he said to the Bedouins.

And when they would have pushed past, he checked them and whispered.

"I am called Mahabat Khan—aye, of the Lodi Pathans. I came to Kandahar to sell horses, and I have come hither with you to hear the prophet preach. Is that understood?"

"Yea," they answered.

They had been surprised when he led them past the picket, and more surprised

that he thought to warn them of a name and a tale to tell when questioned. And I too began to see that the Sirdar was not on strange footing in these hills. As for the name, there might have been a hundred Mahabat Khans within the borders of Ind. Who would think that he assumed his own name?

But now he was no longer the Sirdar. He had left his authority down below at the outpost. From now on he was to be Mahabat Khan, horse trader of the north, and if his disguise failed him he could expect to be held until al Khimar was paid what ransom he might deem fitting. That, at the best—at the worst it meant a dead Sirdar and endless trouble for me.

Yet he seemed well content.

Within an hour the Bedouins drew rein and waited until we came up.

"There is the way," they said. "May God protect you!"

We had gone forward no more than an hour from the outpost, and the valley was still open, the gleam of the river clear to our eyes. On our right hand the slope fell away, divided sharply, and I stared into the utter darkness of a narrow gorge. Toward this they pointed.

"We will wait here with the horses. Keep close to the rock on your right hand."

The Sirdar dismounted; I said something about torches.

"Nay, Daril," the Bedouins said in chorus, "al Khimar's men will shoot at any light. We will guard the horses and the packs."

"But the covenant was that you should show the way," I objected.

The air tasted of ice, and the wind cut through my robes, and my joints ached too much to relish climbing upon a mountain such as this that towered over us.

"Nay," they cried instantly, "Mahabat Khan asked only that we should keep the horses; the beasts can not go upon that path. *Inshallum*, it is not very far to the *sangar*!"

Nevertheless, I saw that the graceless liars took the saddles from the animals and wrapped themselves in their blankets, lying down in a sheltered spot, as if they

expected to spend the night in waiting. Mahabat Khan, seeing this, gave them leave to go back to Kandahar, if we did not return by the time the sun crossed its highest point the next day. I too would have liked the warmth of my blankets, and sleep. But how could I abandon Mahabat Khan and lurk with these horse tenders after my high words concerning responsibility? I could not!

Mahabat Khan strode off, and I followed. In a moment his figure was lost in utter gloom. I hastened forward and touched him before I saw him.

"What is upon thee, Daril?" he asked softly.

"The way is hidden," I said.

"Aye, this is a *tangi*—a water ravine. When we reach the heights we will be able to see the path."

It is not easy to dismount from the saddle and go forward on foot—not at all easy, after the third hour of the night, when the path winds up the rocky face of a cliff. For a man like myself in sandals, lean and stiff limbed and shivering, it is like an ordeal of Tantalus.

Truly, this was a water ravine. Dropping farther below us, a stream rushed and gurgled its way to the river; even the stones that bruised my kneebones were wet, and the air smelled damp. After the first hour, the gorge narrowed and the stars were obscured; the wind beat at us in gusts, and presently the air began to be truly wet, because it rained.

By keeping close to Mahabat Khan, my feet did not stray from the path, which was well, because stones loosed under our tread rattled down through the darkness until they passed beyond hearing. I thought of the Bedouins and hoped that they too were wet.

My shoulders ached, and the calves of my legs. But Mahabat Khan, who had the harder part of feeling the way, did not lag. He must have had legs of iron.

At times we picked our course over a nest of boulders, and then Mahabat Khan was obliged to seek again for the narrow path that hung between the cliff and empty air. The wind no longer beat at

our faces; it swirled up from below, or swooped down upon our shoulders, and my thighs and ribs began to be wet.

At times we climbed upon our hands, over slippery stone and treacherous gravel. No longer could I hear the stream; instead, scores of tiny water courses tinkled and pattered in our ears and, in that terrible gloom, it seemed as if we were wandering blindly, driven like sheep before wind. Nevertheless, I think we tended more and more to the right. Presently the wind ceased. Snow began to beat softly against my chin, under the hood of the robe, and to fall unheeded on my numb hands.

AS IF Satan had withdrawn a curtain, we beheld a strange dawn. The snow had ceased, and the cold increased; and our bruises ached where we had slipped and stumbled and clung. The stars stood in a clear sky, so deep a blue it seemed a shimmering black. Gray pinnacles came forth from behind the curtain of mist, where an old hidden moon shone. I could see Mahabat Khan's swinging coat and *pugi'd* head and the black knobs of boulders in his path.

We moved along a shallow ravine that twisted and turned among rock ledges and, after the murk of the *tangi*, the half light overhead seemed like the true dawn. Presently Mahabat Khan stopped and looked steadily to one side. I saw a flicker of red light run up a chasm.

"Yea," I said to him, through chattering teeth, "Satan hath lighted a lantern to guide us."

He said that somewhere in these gullies a fire burned, and we had seen its reflection upon ice. But it was the cold and not fear that made my jaws quiver. Indeed, such chill as this I had never known.

We went forward more swiftly, looking for the fire. Once I beheld something that danced and beckoned in the shadows of rocks, and went toward it. Eh, it was a grave, and an old grave, because, thrust upon dead branches and knotted to bushes, long rag streamers whipped about in the wind.

"Peace be upon ye," I whispered, hurrying after Mahabat Khan, until we both halted and stared about in the dimness.

"O ye wanderers," a voice shouted at us, "what seek ye here?"

I saw no man, but the voice had come from the gloom under a cliff beside us, and I wondered what manner of men kept watch over the graves in this lofty valley. Mahabat Khan made answer in the harsh Pathan tongue, speaking loudly and arrogantly, until the very rocks rang. The man who had challenged seemed satisfied, because he lifted a long wail like the howl of a wolf.

"Come," Mahabat Khan muttered, and we went on without haste, climbing toward a ridge that showed dark against the stars. Soon we beheld one advancing to meet us, who leaned on a staff, peering at our eyes in the starlight. He grinned and spat and went away without a word, motioning to us to go where we willed.

Thus we followed the path to the ridge and stopped to stare. *W'allahi*, we had come upon the encampment of the hills, not before, but beneath us!

A hundred cubits or more the ridge dropped away beneath our feet, to the bed of a short valley. And scattered through this valley a score of fires flamed bright. Around the fires squatted men in sheepskins and garments of every sort, and women and children behind them. Off in the brush several hundred horses were picketed.

It seemed to me that there were many different clans grouped at those fires, and Mahabat Khan took his time in studying them, saying nothing. On the other three sides the walls of ridged rock loomed sheer, rising out of the firelight. I thought that this pit of the hills was a good place of concealment—a thousand men might lie here for days unseen.

It seemed to me that another road must lead to the bed of the pit, because there were horses and mules and tents down below that could never have come up the *tangi*, or scrambled down the footpath that we were now forced to descend.

No one heeded us, because the men of

the pit were all rising and moving toward the fires at the far end. Mahabat Khan swaggered among them without turning his head, yet using his eyes and ears to pick up scents, like a hound that has returned to his own abiding place after long years. There was a mutter of talk that I did not understand and a smell of wet mud and sweat and burned leather. The women hurried to fetch more wood for the fires, toward which the wave of hillmen moved, and I saw a white stake set in the earth here, on a level spot under the cliff.

It was the bole of a tree, the bark cut away from it, and around it the throng began to thicken, leaving clear about the stake the space of a stone's cast. An elbow was thrust into my ribs and a bearded face leered at me.

"In the name of God!" the man muttered. "The Arab doctor hath come to the hills!"

Eh, this man was one of the Hazaras who had visited me at Sher Jan's fire. Indeed, many of his companions stared at me, for my garments were not like the Pathans'. They seemed both suspicious and arrogant.

"See, *hakim*," quoth another, in broken Persian, "the stake is ready for thee."

"He quakes," jeered a third, "and before long he will shrivel. We will build a fire around him."

I heard several of them draw swords out of sheaths, and the press around me grew greater. Mahabat Khan, standing near, made no sign. I thought that if there were danger, he would take my part.

"*Bism'allah!*" I cried. "Is this the hospitality of thy camp?"

"Nay," grunted the Hazara, "this is not our *sangar*. What led thy steps hither?"

"The other Arabs—they of the horse traders' tents—told me of a holy man in this spot."

A pockmarked Pathan, with a sword scar whitening his brow, pushed through the crowd to me and growled.

"Who led thee hither?"

At last Mahabat Khan turned, stepping between us.

"I!" he said. "I did."

They all looked at him, finding nothing to say for the moment. I wondered if any would know the face of the Sirdar of Ind. But then horns began to quaver behind us, and drums rumbled. The Pathans forgot us and thronged about the cleared space, into which a score of the elder men were moving, swords in hands. Turning their left shoulder to the post, these old warriors made a circle about it.

"*Hai! Ahaï-hai!*" one shouted, and the drums quickened into a fierce beat.

Mahabat Khan touched me on the shoulder and led me to a blanket by one of the fires. Here we sat, our faces toward the stake, the veiled women moving off a little from us.

"Silence is best," he whispered, "for a little, until this is ended."

The music grew louder; younger warriors ran from the crowd toward the elders, who were now moving slowly around the stake, swinging their swords over their heads. Eh, the youths had more supple joints. They hastened into rings, leaping and swinging their blades in time to the music.

Some had two swords, some a sword and musket. All the circles were now revolving about the posts in the same direction, and the swiftly darting blades made red light above the tossing heads. Faster leaped the warriors, the sword edges whistling in the air. Straining throats made deep tongued clamor.

More swiftly the long robed figures ran, long locks tossing about the turbaned heads. But never a blade clashed another, never a steel edge slashed a man. The cliffs roared back in echo:

"*Hai—hai!*"

Half smiling, yet his eyes agleam, the Sirdar watched the sword dance of his hills, seeming to expect some greater miracle of movement and madness. And it happened.

There was a rush of hoofs, a straining creak of saddles and jangling of silver laden reins. Standing in their stirrups,

nay, leaping upright upon the saddles, the men who had mounted horses joined the throng, rushing about the post. They tossed their swords into the air, caught them and flashed the blades down at the dancers. Red firelight flickered on the bare steel.

The Pathans who sat about the spot were staring, loose lipped and shouting. Mudstained children jumped about in their bare feet beside their mothers. More and more swiftly the drums resounded and the hoofs raced. Then some of the horses darted aside, figures swirled and a man shouted in rage.

I had seen a horse stumble. Its rider must have slashed another Pathan—the same pockmarked giant who had confronted me. He gripped his ear, the blood running through his fingers; the greater part of the ear was cut clean away.

Shouting, he made toward the horseman who had wounded him. The drums fell silent, the horns ceased, and the dancers ran toward the two antagonists. Deep toned clamor arose—men snarling at their companions of a moment before. Panting and mad with excitement, they would have thrown themselves at each other, for at such a time it takes little to turn play into slaughter, and many clans with many feuds had joined the dance. But the tumult was quieted before the first blow could be given.

Above the stake on a great flat boulder appeared a slight figure in a brown robe and green turban, and a high voice shrilled over the quarreling—a single word.

I saw that this figure was veiled beneath the eyes. At its bidding the Pathans dropped their swords, the wounded man fell silent and, in a moment, they turned to go back to their fires, as jackals turn at the coming of a wolf.

"What is this?" I whispered.

But Mahabat Khan frowned, his eyes intent.

"A time for silence," he repeated under his breath.

Still fingering their weapons, panting from the dance, the hillmen sought the fires. Some of them snarled at me; but

they were too full of their half stifled quarrel and too eager to hear what the man on the boulder might say, to bother about an old Arab.

"O ye of little wit!" he cried, in their speech.

Nay, at the time of his speaking, I understood not, but many have told me his words. For the words of al Khimar were treasured in the memory of the hillmen.

"Know ye not that it is written, 'Nothing happens save by the will of Allah?' What have I seen? A horse stumbled, a man was cut by a sword, and ye thoughtless ones—ye less than children—would have taken life, here, before me!"

Slowly he spoke, pausing to give them time to hear and understand and mutter among themselves. Every word was clear as the clank of steel, and I thought that at one time al Khimar had been a *meuz-zin*. The warrior of the slashed ear made as if to complain to him, but the veiled prophet waved him away angrily, and he went in among his fellows, unheeded.

I saw now why al Khimar had appeared so suddenly. Behind the flat-topped boulder was a dark mouth of a cave. Within this he must have stood and watched. There were many clefts and ridges in the rock wall, but this seemed to be a cavern of some size.

"Why are ye here?" he asked, and looked from one to another.

The Pathans moved uneasily and many thrust their swords back into their girdles.

"To obey," responded an old man, "to hear and obey."

"Take heed that ye do it!" Again he searched the crowd with his eyes, and the listeners held their breaths. "Have I come at this hour of the night to see ye wield swords? Are ye indeed children that ye may not wait for a space without a game?"

"Nay," cried a bearded warrior with one eye, "Shamil the Red Snout set up the stake and called upon us to show our skill. I am of the Yuzufi Khel*—"

* The tribe of Joseph. Also David and Solomon are favorite names in the Afghan hills, where tribes trace their descent from the rulers of Israel.

Even their reverence for the holy man could not keep these children of the hills curbed entirely. They answered back like defiant sons and, like sons, received their chastening. I noticed likewise that when they spoke the echoes flung back the words. The louder they shouted, the louder roared the opposite cliffs. Foolishly, they tried to make themselves understood by shouting.

But al Khimar, standing apart from them and facing the end of the valley down which we had come, managed to speak without stirring up the echoes. No doubt he had experimented until he had discovered how to do this, yet it filled the hillmen with awe—they knew that echoes were the voices of devils, mocking men.

"Thou art a pig's butcher!" gibed al Khimar, and the valley rocked with laughter.

When the echoes rumbled—*Ho-oho-ho!*—they were frightened and fell silent again.

"Will ye take up the swords again and play at butchering—or listen to me?"

"Nay, al Khimar," protested the Yuzufi, "we will listen."

And thus the veiled prophet quieted them by mocking them, and turned their thoughts to him.

"I dreamed last night of war," he said then. "Have ye forgotten that time I beheld in a dream the coming of the caravan with silver and precious stuffs? In this new dream a message came to me. These were the words of the message: 'Think ye your wealth will save you, if your deeds destroy you?'"

They murmured, saying that truly they had not forgotten.

"The gain was great at that time," quoth al Khimar, "and now—very soon—it will be more. But you must win it by your deeds!"

"Ah!" cried the Yuzufi. "Lead us to Kandahar! We have waited and increased in strength, and now, surely, it was time."

"O thou shameless one!" shrieked al Khimar. "If these men followed thee, many would be slain with little gain.

Know ye not the citadel of Kandahar hath walls too high to climb? Behind walls the Moguls will be stronger than ye. Know ye not that the Sirdar of Ind hath come to Kandahar with a following? What talk is this? Nay, I dreamed of another matter. In the night this was revealed to me—a rich camp, with camels and mules. A camp of silk pavilions and ivory and red leather—of full wineskins and a thousand slaves."

The Pathans gazed up at him, plainly astonished, and Mahabat Khan chewed his mustache.

"Where?" shouted a man far back of us.

Al Khimar pointed to the west.

"At the edge of the plain, among the foothills, I saw this camp."

Then a camel driver sprang up, his face distorted with amazement.

"By Allah, indeed!" he shouted. "There is a camp, down below, a day's ride. Yesterday I saw it, and it is filled with Persians, lords and servants who have come hither to hunt."

The shrill voice of al Khimar soared.

"May their eyes be darkened! They will fall to our swords—save those who would better be held for ransom. Yea, we shall have slaves enough to glut the markets of Kandahar. For nothing happens save by the will of God! The fate of these Persians is not to be altered—the hour of their doom is written."

And for a while he harangued the Pathans, promising to lead them to victory, rousing them again to eagerness and anger, though they needed little rousing. Thus he made them cease to think of Kandahar, and to long for the spoils of the camp below. Never before had the wealthy lords of Persia ventured so near the frontier.

He painted with words the attack upon the *lashgar* of the hunters by night, the overthrow of the guards, the swift charge among the tents, the slaughter and the pursuit of the fleeing, and the capture of young and fair women—until the mass of hillmen rose to their feet and shouted to be led down into the valleys.

"Not yet," said al Khimar, when the

roaring had died away between the cliffs, "not yet is the time. In two days—the night following the next." Then he lifted his slender arms. "Upon ye be the blessing of Allah!"

This done, he turned and stepped down from his rock, vanishing from the circle of firelight as swiftly as a shadow. He must have entered his cavern, because I could not see him anywhere behind the rock. A moment later, the red bearded opium eater Shamil—whom I had defied in the Valley of Thieves—came and stood upon the rock, leering down at the fires as if all these men were no more than sheep to be led under the knife. As usual, his eyes were nearly closed, yet I thought from a sudden movement and a turn of the head that he had noticed me.

MAHABAT KHAN sat in talk with the Yuzufi, who was called Artaban, and who wore about his neck a charm. It was a camel's tooth upon which a prayer had been carved by some holy man. Artaban carried it in a silver locket, hanging upon a plaited cord. He said to us, for he loved the sound of his own voice, that this charm made him safe from bullets or steel.

"Allah is my witness," he swore, "that bullets have gone through my sleeves and girdle and headcloth without harming my skin. I had it of a man I slew with my hands."

Truly this Artaban had a bear's strength in his arms. Grinning with yellow teeth, he showed me how he had slain the owner of the charm, seizing his beard in one hand and pulling to one side while with his other hand he thrust the man's shoulder in the opposite direction.

"Allah is merciful," he grinned again. "The night after the next I will flay one of the dog-born dogs of Persians alive. They had my brother for a slave and ripped him up with a knife."

Eh, the Persians love the Pathans as wolves love panthers; because the ones reverence Ali as the successor to Muhammad, and the others disown Ali. It is said

that no feuds are as fiercely hot as the feuds of cousins, and no quarrels are as deadly as the strife of Alyites and Sunnites.

"And will al Khimar lead ye to attack?" asked Mahabat Khan, looking about him idly, as if no more than courtesy had prompted the words.

"Nay," declared Artaban. "He gives us warning of what must be done; he chooses the fortunate hour of sallying forth; but I and the red Shamil and the Hazara chieftain lead."

"Truly, ye have many men."

Artaban grunted.

"Six hundred and more. There are guards upon the roads, and other men in Kandahar."

"It is a great miracle," said Mahabat Khan, sinking his voice, "that the Veiled One eats not and never ventures from his place."

"Allah is great!"

"What man could go without food for many days?"

Artaban pulled at his beard and blinked, flattered by the reputation of his prophet.

"Perhaps," went on Mahabat Khan gravely, "there be fools who believe such matters, but thou and I are men of intelligence, and we understand that even saints must have food—even though it pleases them to pretend otherwise."

"True, by Allah!" The one-eyed Yuzufi chieftain frowned and tried to look wise.

"Some say there is another way out of this cavern."

"Then let them look! I will not enter it."

"Does none go in?"

"Shamil—nay, I saw a man of the Waziri *khels* carried out with his toes turned up and a knife in his heart. Why not? Al Khimar keeps all the offerings of his people—all the silver that we shall need some day—in there."

"True. Who does not know a day of need?"

"As for me, I take what I require."

Artaban struck his fist against his broad chest covered with chain mail to

which some traces of guilt still clung. I wondered if the steel shirt were the reason why the Yuzufi had escaped wounds.

"So Shamil goes in," nodded Mahabat Khan, his head close to the tribesman's shaggy locks. "Surely he is the servant of the Veiled One."

"Nay, his watchman. Red Shamil keeps the silver and sees to it that none goes in. If one of us went in, how would we know that the silver and precious things were not stolen? The Hazaras and the Waziri are great thieves." Artaban spat.

I heard a man breathe at my shoulder and turned swiftly. The man called Shamil stood within touch of me, his eyes fixed on the ground, his thin lips sneering.

"So," he said harshly, "ye twain have come hither to hear the Veiled One? Will ye go to his place and speak with him?"

The Yuzufi dropped back a pace and stared, but Mahabat Khan considered a moment and nodded.

"Aye."

"Why?" demanded the watcher.

"I am of the Lodi Pathans and I have come far. I bear a message to al Khimar."

"From whom?"

"That is for him to hear."

For a moment Shamil combed his beard, swaying his red head from side to side. I wondered what the Sirdar would find to say to the prophet. It would have been a mistake to refuse to go with Shamil—who among these men would refuse? And suspicion was in the air.

"And thou, Daril," snarled the red beard, "hast thou a message also?"

I shook my head, and he turned on his heel, motioning for us to follow. Mahabat Khan did not look at me, but he waited until I had reached his side before he advanced. His step and bearing told me that he foresaw no good thing awaiting us. Artaban and a dozen others trailed along to listen.

The fires had died to glowing embers and, when we climbed up behind the boulder, we could see little except the dark mouth of the cavern. A cold gust of

air touched our faces. Shamil bade us stand, while he went forward to speak to al Khimar concerning us. I looked up at the stars, above the black wall of the cliff, and envied the Bedouins in their blankets by the river.

W'allahi! It is written that no man knoweth what the next moment will bring to him. I thought of many things, but not of what happened now. Shamil had vanished into the darkness, and I strained my ears in vain, hearing only the coughing and shuffling of the tribesmen who had lingered by the boulder.

Then I beheld a tiny spot of light that danced on the rock wall of the cavern. It vanished, and a soft glow was cast upon the arched roof, slowly moving toward us. I stared at it like a sheep. Mahabat Khan moved beside me. Steel slithered faintly through leather.

The flickering glow came nearly over us, when suddenly a glaring light shone full into my eyes.

The light was from a copper lantern held in a man's hand. I could see the hand and the long sleeve, but little else, for the frame of the lantern was so wrought that it threw its illumination only in front. In such shadow and at such a moment the eyes seize upon a little thing, a familiar thing. I was sure that I noticed Shamil's curling beard. I think he had brought the lantern from elsewhere and wrapped it in a soft blanket, because presently my toes caught in a loose cloth upon the rock floor. But at that moment my ears were filled by a high pitched shout—the voice of al Khimar.

"Spies! These twain be spies, sent by the men of Kandahar. Slay them, ye men of the hills!"

The voice came from behind Shamil, and I thought that verily this was a prophet of true words! One instant's sight of our faces, and he had cried out at us. The hair prickled on my scalp, and I put my hand to my sword hilt.

It was the part of Mahabat Khan to act now; he was the leader, his the responsibility. I did not need to wait the space of

a quickly drawn breath to see what he meant to do. Before the light shone upon us, he had drawn his blade, and now he slashed at Shamil behind the lantern.

The watcher of the Veiled One caught the glimmer of steel descending and sprang back. Mahabat Khan was after him like a panther, and Shamil ran to the side of the cavern, the light swinging wildly. Eh, Shamil bleated like a sheep, and I ran in to corner him. Nay, I should have remained at the edge of the cavern!

Mahabat Khan whirled suddenly away, flinging over his shoulder a command to me to finish the red beard. I heard his saber grate against steel, and then the *clish-clash-clank* of many blades striking together.

Shamil was like a rat, slipping this way and that, evading me. He drew and flung a knife that ripped through a fold of my head cloth, the guard scratching my ear. Darting past me, he ran out of the mouth of the cavern, close to the rock.

I saw then that Mahabat Khan had taken his stand in the entrance of the cavern. His sweeping blade barely missed Shamil. But four Pathans were pressing in upon him, Artaban roaring his war shout, the foremost of them.

My eyes searched the cavern for a glimpse of al Khimar, but in vain. He had vanished. And yet I saw one thing that was most precious. The beam of the lantern, which Shamil had dropped, struck against a cleft in the rock wall at the back of the cavern. I saw that the cleft was wide enough for a man to pass through and that the ground lay upward within it.

Mahabat Khan was engaged too closely with the four hillmen to withdraw. The mouth of the grotto was perhaps seven paces wide, and they were trying to slip past him to take him from the sides. Verily, the Sirdar seemed to be two men, bending from side to side, parrying and slashing with an arm of steel. With a quick thrust and snap of the blade he disarmed one of the Pathans. Nay, he did

not cry out his name or make any plea for mercy.

It would have been easier to check a wolf pack by prayers. I made up my mind to join him and fall, if need be, with a weapon in hand, when Artaban began to shout at his companions to stand clear.

"Aside ye dogs! I will make trial of him, and the Veiled One shall see his blood run."

The Pathans to right and left of the one eyed chieftain gave back and Artaban sprang at Mahabat Khan alone. Between the faint glow of the outer fires and the radiance of the lantern their figures loomed half seen—tall forms that swayed forward and back while steel grated shrilly. Eh, it lasted no more than a moment.

Artaban slashed fiercely and the Sirdar caught the descending blade upon his hand guard. The steel snapped and flew against the rock. Artaban bent low and drew from his girdle a long pistol. Stepping back swiftly, he pulled at the trigger and the flint snapped down.

Many times have I seen such weapons snap without roaring, yet fortune favored the Yuzufi, for the pistol bellowed. I heard the bullet flatten itself somewhere upon the rock, and Mahabat Khan suffered no hurt at all, while black smoke swirled through all the cavern.

"Back!" I cried to him, seizing this instant of quiet, while the Pathans were peering into the smoke. "Here—"

He turned and ran toward me, and I snatched up the lantern. To light his way—there was no time for talk or hesitation—I ran into the cleft, finding it so narrow that the sides brushed my shoulders.

The ground was firm beneath me, and the lantern showed the marks of many footprints. For perhaps ten lance lengths I went up, the crevice growing wider, until I stood within a second rock chamber.

"Set the light down—there!" Mahabat Khan pointed with his sword tip, and took his stand at one side of the entrance.

Before doing as he commanded I turned the light in all directions. The

walls were of the same red stone, ridged and crumbling, as the outer cliffs, yet darker. Space and darkness lay above us, and I saw no end to this place. Near my feet lay several blankets, a water jar and the stained leaves of a Koran. In truth we had come to the nest of al Khimar—a place of cold and darkness.

"Good!" laughed Mahabat Khan, breathing a little quickly.

When I had listened to the muttering of the Pathans in the outer cavern, I whispered to him that it would be better to go away. Shamil was urging them to follow us, and Artaban and others were grumbling. Verily, their fear of al Khimar served us well, because the hillmen were reluctant to enter the cleft where the dim light showed. We had vanished in the smoke; they had no love of this maw of the cliff. In a little while Shamil might persuade them to go forward, perhaps by leading them.

"We can hold this corridor," the Sirdar mused.

"And gain what?" I asked. "Nay, without water or food, it would avail us nothing."

He considered and nodded.

"Is there a way out?"

"God alone knows. Let us go and see."

After looking down the passage, he felt in his girdle and drew out a little wooden tube, the same in which Baki had sealed his message. He looked at it and tossed it down the cleft. "A bone for Shamil to gnaw on! Come!"

Picking up the lantern he shook it close to his ear to hear how much oil might be in it. Then he grinned and strode back into the depths of the cavern, I following. It was needful to go quickly or not at all.

IT WAS a strange path, that in the belly of the mountain. Indeed, it seemed to be no path at all, but a goat's track that squeezed through rock walls and ascended from ledge to ledge, and once ran along a bridge of stone over a crevice that had no bottom at all. Here the air rushed up, and the flame of the lantern

flickered and died down, so that I breathed not until Mahabat Khan sheltered it in a niche between two boulders.

He said that water had made this passage through the heart of the mountain, and showed me how the surface of the rock was worn, and how the very boulders were round and smooth.

At times we were forced to quest about and choose among many passages. The thought came to me that we might have chosen wrongly, and were lost in this accursed place; but Mahabat Khan was only concerned about the oil in the lantern, lest it fail and leave us in darkness. We were walking swiftly through a long corridor when a thought came to me.

"*Bism'allah!* The Veiled One must have gone before us."

Mahabat Khan looked at me. "Eh, Daril, I wonder if Shamil is not the prophet? Hast thou seen the two, at the same moment?"

I pondered this and shook my head. Verily the veil might have hidden that red beard. I suspected that al Khimar really came forth and ate and slept among the Pathans, unknown to them. Other rogues had played that trick before. Among them, al Khimar would be no more than a hillman, listening to their talk. Then, slipping into the cavern, he would put on his clean garments and the green headcloth and the veil, and come out upon his speaking place. Only at times did he appear thus.

"But the voice," I said, "the voice was different."

"Even a common singer can do that," he reminded me.

"In the cave, when the light appeared, the voice seemed to come from behind Shamil."

"True," he nodded. "That is a more difficult trick, yet I have known conjurers to throw their voices elsewhere." He thought for a while. "By a gesture or little thing a man is known. What sawest thou of al Khimar?"

"That he had a light skin and fine eyes—that he is slender in body, and his mind quick to read thoughts."

"And knows our faces," laughed Mahabat Khan. "Except for thee, he had put an end to us."

"If Shamil is not the man," I responded, "he must have gone ahead of us."

"Then God grant we catch him, for I need al Khimar in my hands. Look!"

He held the light low and pointed. I saw that the ground was damp and that snow lay among the boulders. Surely it did not snow down here in the belly of the mountain. I turned my eyes upward. Stars winked down at me from between the dark sides of a gorge. We had come out into the open air, and Mahabat Khan spent some time in observing landmarks so that he could find the passage again.

A little farther on we stopped again. Here a sprinkle of snow lay upon the gravel and, clearly pressed into it, we saw the mark of slender and small feet, going in the way that we were going. But we did not see al Khimar. The gorge opened out into a nest of blind ravines. We climbed a height to observe what lay around us.

Eh, thus we beheld many things—the snow-whitened peaks, tinged by the first glow of dawn, the dark mass of Kandahar far down ahead of us, the shadow-filled plain and the great crimson fire of sunrise. It was bitterly cold, and all my body ached; my knees quivered and creaked. When the sun flooded these lofty levels, I sought a sheltered spot and lay down.

"*Bism'allah!*" I said to the Sirdar. "I did not come with thee to join a Pathan sword dance, nor did I come to frolic in ice and snow. I am tired, and here will I sleep."

So I thrust my arms into my sleeves and slept, Mahabat Khan sitting beside me. When I waked the shadows had turned, and he was still in the same spot, the lifeless lantern at his feet. He had waited to watch beside me, and I was ashamed of my weariness and ill temper.

"Nay, Daril," he laughed, "I have learned something. Now it is time we went down to Kandahar, or those Bed-

ouins will be back and rouse Baki with their tales."

THOSE Bedouins were back indeed. They had been routed out of their sleep by a rush of Pathans down the *tangi* at dawn, and had had to flee without their saddles or blankets. Probably Shamil had remembered the guides who brought us to the hills and had sent a band down to bring them in. The tribesmen being afoot, my Arabs had escaped without hurt, but were gloomy over the loss of the saddles.

When Mahabat Khan and I walked into the courtyard of his house, they were saying that all the forces of the Veiled One had sought to take them, that they had held their ground as long as they could, in spite of the fact that we twain must be captive or slain.

Thus they were protesting. The Rajput followers of the Sirdar were in a cold rage, while Abu Ashtar cursed. When they saw us, all became silent except the blind man.

"By God!" said I to the Bedouins. "I marvel that you have your shirts—or that you did not leave your breeches in the hands of the hillmen."

I added that their flight had made us walk back; and to this they had nothing to say.

"Shall we beat them?" the captain of the Rajputs asked his lord, very willingly.

"Nay," said Mahabat Khan, "they are not to be blamed."

"But the saddles—and the packs?"

"I swear," put in old Abu Ashtar who had listened intently, "that these worthless and light minded puppies of mine shall bring you other saddles."

"I ask a harder thing," responded Mahabat Khan gravely. "That they, and you, shall say no word concerning this past night."

"On my head," swore the blind chieftain.

"Aye," assented the Sirdar with a flash of grimness, "for thou shalt be surety for their silence."

Thus chastened, the Bedouins could

only stare at me. They yearned to know how we had come back to Kandahar, because they were certain we had not come down the *tangi* again. I hinted that Mahabat Khan had stood off all the men of the Veiled One with his sword, and made great show of wiping the stains of dampness from my blade with a clean cloth.

Eh, it is written that the boaster digs a pitfall for his feet to tread. After I had mocked the Bedouins and looked to see whether the mare were safe in the Sirdar's stable, I began to be hungry. Mahabat Khan seemed to have forgotten food. I was not minded to beg of his men, so I went forth to find Kushal, who had gone into the bazaar.

Seeking him, I wandered into the shadows of narrow alleys, stooping beneath the woven roofs of stalls. In a dark place among sacks of rice and trays of tea bricks I heard a swift movement behind me.

I turned to look, but it was my kismet that I should see no more in Kandahar that day. A dusty sack was cast over my head and held about my shoulders. A hand reached forth and jerked the sword from my girdle, while a dagger's point pricked the tender skin under my ribs.

"O Daril," a voice whispered through the sack, "thou art a man of judgment. Walk between us quietly. We have no mind to slay thee—now, and in this place."

"Who art thou?" I said foolishly, for the voice seemed familiar.

"Thy fate!" I heard a laugh. "Come!"

W'allahi, in such a plight a man is less than an ass! With a sack held over my shoulders, all dignity was lost. Hands gripped my arms and led me back into the stall, stumbling over bales and rugs. For a moment sunlight shone on my head; then we entered the darkness of another covered place, smelling of hemp and spices and dirt.

Here I heard camels grunting and bubbling, as they do when the loads are put on. My arms were drawn behind my

shoulders and bound together skillfully. Then my knees were bound, and my ankles.

I was lifted high by several men and dropped in what seemed to be a basket, but a basket that swayed and creaked under me. Then the ends of the cords from my arms and ankles were drawn taut and knotted—so that by bending my knees up under my chin I could ease the pain of the cords, but could not raise myself in any way.

The sack was lifted and replaced at once by a kerchief, tied loosely under my chin.

"To keep off flies, O Daril," whispered the voice.

"May God requite thee for it!" I answered.

"Harken to this, O *hakim*. Thou art in a camel's howdah, and thou art bound upon a little journey. Men will walk beside thee who care not at all for thy life. They will carry spears. If thy voice is heard after this, for any reason, those long spearheads will be thrust through thy basket. Dost thou understand?"

"Indeed," I responded. "But let the journey be short, for I shall desire water."

"Water thou shalt have and wine."

I thought that the speaker mocked me, and I said no more. As if they had waited only for me, the men began to move about; the camel beneath me rocked and lurched to its feet, and the smell of it came more strongly through the wicker work of the panier. Then we began to walk.

By the sounds around me, we passed out into narrow alleys, brushing through the stalls of merchants who cursed the ancestors of warriors who would lead he-camels through the market at such an hour. We turned hither and yon, and began to move more swiftly.

By the motion of the camel, I knew that we went downhill, and once I heard a clatter of hoofs and the voices of Rajputs riding past, but I thought of the spears and made no sound. My captors had laid branches in the open top of the basket,

and through these and the 'kerchief I could see no more than tiny sparkles of sunlight and blue sky.

We halted for many moments in a place where horses were gathered. Men walked about on all sides. From the talk I suspected that we were among soldiers of the Mogul. When we went on again, a deep shadow passed over my head, and sounds echoed hollowly. We were moving under an arch, probably the outer wall of Kandahar.

After this had been left behind us, things were quieter. The camels settled into a swifter stride, when I heard faintly a voice close to my head. It whispered again, a little louder.

"Ho, Daril—how is it with thee?"

Eh, it was the voice of Kushal, the songmaker, and I answered as softly.

"Where art thou?"

He laughed a little then.

"In the other basket."

A spear or sword blade slapped angrily the side of my panier, and I said no more. I had wished to ask him whither we were bound, but what mattered it? We were going whither we were going. It seemed to me then—I had wondered at first if the Bedouins had not come after me to make me captive on some whim—as if we were bound for the hills.

Al Khimar's men might have entered Kandahar in force, after the Bedouins, and seen me stalking like a witless gazelle through the bazaar. In truth, I did not dream of what lay before me!

After hearing Kushal, I knew that I had a companion of misfortune. It was warm in the panier and, in spite of cords and the ache of hunger, I began to doze. Presently all sounds and smells drifted away and I slept.

THE camel waked me by kneeling. It must have been late in the afternoon, for the sun was no longer overhead. I was lifted from my basket and carried under shelter, placed upon a carpet; all the cords were severed with a sword. Only a little at first did I stretch my limbs; they ached as if all the nerves had

been pierced. At this moment Kushal cried out beside me.

"Thou!"

"Thy kismet," murmured the soft voice of a woman.

I pulled the cloth from my head and saw that I was under a tent, or rather, a pavilion of blue silk, set with a splendid carpet. The air had a scent of rose leaves. Kushal sat beside me, a 'kerchief in his hand, his bloodshot eyes flaming and his *pugri* and white damask garments clean in order, in spite of his trussing. The severed ends of cords lay about him.

Beyond the tent pole, on a cushioned divan, knelt Nisa. She nodded at me.

"*Hai*—thou art not an eagle this evening but a frowsy old owl, Daril."

I knew now that her voice had warned and advised me after my capture. Verily, it seemed to change with her mood. But Kushal was gripped by the heedless anger of youth. His hands shook and his voice trembled.

"God be my witness!" he cried. "I shall never honor word of thine again. In the bazaar one came to me saying that Nisa had need of my aid. I followed, and was caught like—"

"A caged parrot," she giggled. "Oh, I watched thy struggles."

Suddenly and strangely Kushal mastered himself, became utterly calm; only, his cheeks paled and his eyes darkened.

"It pleases thee to mock me," he said.

Aware of this new mood, she glanced at him from the corners of her eyes.

"To repay thee for the copper coin," she murmured.

He shrugged his slender shoulders and turned to me.

"I heard thee say thou thirsted, Daril. Only a man without honor or a woman—" his eyes ran over Nisa, dwelling upon every part of her body, as a slave buyer might look at a new purchase—"without shame would deny water to a captive."

Nisa seemed to draw back before his glance. It was true that she went unveiled, and might not be trusted, as we had both learned, but the songmaker's new mood hurt her, and she too turned to me.

"Wilt thou have sherbet or red wine, Daril?"

"Water," I grumbled, for sherbet increases thirst, and wine was not for my tasting.

She clapped her hands, and that same maid tripped in, to return presently with a tray of fruit and china bowls of clear water. I drank, and began to eat of the dates, but Kushal waved away the woman. This was foolish in him, for hunger and thirst are no allies in a moment of need, and it is more profitable to prod a panther than to anger a young woman.

"What seekest thou?" he asked Nisa. "Money?"

"Nay, the emerald in thy turban cloth."

Without a word Kushal reached up and undid the clasp that held the precious stone in place. He tossed it upon the divan at the knees of the singing girl.

"And what of Daril?" jeered the young Pathan.

But Nisa rose and went to the entrance, passing out without answer. At once—they must have been standing on guard—two of her warriors came and took stand within the entrance, grinning at us. When I finished all the dates, I tried to get Kushal to talk, asking him in Arabic what all this meant and what might be in store for us.

"Ask her!" he muttered after a long silence. "She alone can explain her secrets. Last night, when I went to look again at her house, these same men told me she had gone away."

I remembered that she had warned Kushal to go from Kandahar; but it is profitless to try to reason why a woman does things. Each hour brings her different moods and different thoughts.

"Not more than a day ago thou didst call her a child untaught," I reminded him. "What now?"

Kushal was not minded to smile at his misfortune. He lay down upon the divan with his arms beneath his head and pretended to care or think nothing at all about it. He had been taken captive and bundled into a camel panier by a woman, and his honor suffered greatly.

"She could have had the emerald yesterday, for the asking," he cried once.

It occurred to me that she had said Kushal must leave the city within a week. The time, it seemed, had grown less—something had happened since our first meeting with her. Sitting in silence I listened, and after a while became certain of two things.

We were in a strange encampment, and no small one. Horses were being watered—many of them. Men passed with a hurried tread, and such talk as I heard was in Persian or dialects I knew not. At sunset the caller-to-prayer made himself heard, and his words were not familiar.

There did not seem to be many women about, and indeed little was to be heard. The camp seemed to be muffled in quiet, yet in constant motion. After dark the maid brought us a good repast, and I ate Kushal's share when he would not touch it.

Once I made as if to go out of the entrance, but the guards stayed me, saying that it was not permitted.

"By whose orders?" I asked.

They pretended not to understand. So I went and sat and listened attentively. Eh, by its tracks a camel reveals itself—whether it be laden or not, whether it be old or young, weak or strong; and by the sounds of evening much may be learned of a camp.

These were no tents of merchants. Orders were given in the speech of the Persians, and arrogantly. When a group of men passed our tent, I did not see the glow of torches or lanterns—they moved about in darkness, often stumbling over pavilion ropes and picket lines. At such times, weapons clanged or clashed. I heard an officer curse some servants for allowing a fire to blaze up. By one thing and another I thought that this was an encampment of nobles, with strong guards, and that the leaders desired not to attract attention to themselves. All this was true.

About the second hour of the night Nisa slipped into the tent. She seemed to be grieving. Her bright hair fell in disorder about her cheeks; there were shadows

under her dark eyes. Soundlessly she went toward the divan upon which Kushal lay. At his feet she seated herself, he paying no heed.

In a moment I heard feet approaching, striding free and heavily. A word of command was spoken. Our two guards sprang up swiftly, drawing back the entrance hanging.

Nisa crossed her arms on her breast and bent her splendid head until it nearly touched the divan upon which she knelt.

"*Shabash!*" A man spoke harshly. "Well done!"

Peering into the outer darkness I made out several figures in long mantles, the gleam of tiaras and jeweled turban crests—for an instant only, because, at a second command, the guards let fall the hanging and the footsteps retreated. Beyond doubt these lords of the encampment did not wish to be seen.

For a while Nisa sat in silence, brushing the flies from Kushal's head, her eyes dim with thought. Never have I seen a more beautiful pair than these two—the wild Pathan, cloaked in his pride, and the golden maned singing girl at his feet.

Eh, many times have I seen the fire of love brighten and grow dim. Nisa was wrapped up in her love for this man, as strange and fierce a love as ever glowed in the eyes of a pantheress. As if fire had burned all other feeling out of her, she bent over his feet, sweeping away the flies with the end of her shawl, until suddenly she remembered me and sprang up, bidding me follow her. Only then did Kushal look at her, as a man might glance at a dog behaving in some new fashion.

Outside the tent, she led me swiftly toward a mass of horses and stopped under the clear starlight, where none could overhear.

"An order has been given to flay him alive," she whispered, and I began to understand a little why she grieved.

At Kushal, sitting the saddle of his horse and singing in her courtyard, she had hurled insolence and defiance. For Kushal, captive and defenseless, she

grieved. And yet she had brought him hither herself!

"They will torture him," she went on, "unless—" she checked the words to glance fleetingly into distant shadows—"unless thou canst bring Mahabat Khan hither before sunrise—sunrise after this next."

I wondered what this encampment was and why they wanted Mahabat Khan and how she expected me to bring him; but I said nothing, since she was minded to speak freely at last.

"When the first rim of the sun is seen over the plain, they will bind him and begin tearing the skin from his throat and breast," she whispered. "By noon they will have taken the skin from his back and at the end of the day he will be dead."

"No man may escape his fate," I said, to spur her on.

The white blur of her face drew near me and the scent of rose leaves came to my nostrils.

"Daril," she cried softly, "thou art a man of honor. Forget that I beguiled thee in Kandahar and made sport of him." She clasped her hands and laid them against my breast. "Wilt thou pledge me this?"

"What?" I asked. "And under what conditions?"

"To ride now, at once, to Kandahar, and tell Mahabat Khan all thou hast seen. Tell him that the life of his companion, the songmaker, is in his hands. He may come alone, or with his men." She leaned close to look up into my eyes. "Daril, a man such as thou wilt not believe a woman's oath. I can not swear to this truth, but it is surely true that Mahabat Khan will suffer no harm by coming."

"To whom?" I asked. "Who sends for him?"

"I—I do. It will be better for him to come without escort."

"*W'allahi!* Will the Sirdar of Ind come forth unattended at a woman's whim? To visit a woman?"

"To save the life of Kushal—aye! He must!"

"What if he chooses to bring a squadron of Moguls and his Rajputs?"

"It is all one to me; but he will fare better alone. Nay, I swear—nay, Daril, a greater lord than thou or the Sirdar of Ind, swears on his honor that Mahabat Khan will suffer no least harm. He will be entertained for a day, perhaps a little longer, and then he and the songmaker may ride free."

Reaching down, I took her wrist in my fingers, feeling the beat of the blood in her veins. Understanding that I was making test of her, she withdrew her wrist and pressed my hand under her breast against the heart. It fluttered and throbbed as if heavy fever were in her veins. Indeed, fever burned in her.

"Thou art beside thyself, Nisa," I said. "Mahabat Khan will not believe such a tale as this of mine."

At this she laughed softly.

"Nay, he will believe. I will give thee such proof as he will believe. Thus!"

She put into my fingers a hard object, about the size of a date, wrapped in thin silk.

"Kushal's emerald," she explained. "And here—" she gave me a tiny tube such as messenger pigeons carry—"is a letter saying that Kushal will be tortured, as I have said, unless he comes."

I let the things lie in my hand while I pondered. Indeed, the songmaker was captive in this camp. As to the matter of his death, I knew not. But I believed that Nisa hoped to save his life, if Mahabat Khan could be persuaded to visit this place. Clearly it would serve no one for me to remain sitting in this tent. I decided to go to the Sirdar and explain all that had happened. The responsibility, then, would be his.

"Give me a horse," I said, "and tell me where Kandahar lies."

She sighed, as if a burden had been taken from her back, and motioned toward the line of beasts near us.

"My men have a horse awaiting thee. Kandahar lies no more than two hours to the north."

"How can I enter at night?" I demand-

ed, remembering that the gates would be closed.

"Show the silver tube to an officer." She waved me away, as if dreading any least delay. "God requite it thee!"

The tokens I thrust into my girdle and asked yet one more thing.

"Thy sword?" She clapped her hands impatiently, and presently a tall figure swaggered up leading a saddled horse. "Sher Jan took it. He has it now."

The figure halted suddenly, and I stretched forth my hand. Indeed it was Sher Jan, my companion of the road, and among his many weapons he had my scimitar in his sash. Reluctantly he drew it forth, and I girdled it on again, without a word.

"Lead him past the guards," Nisa commanded the camel driver, when I had mounted and, in silence, Sher Jan holding my rein, we moved away. I heard the sound of sobbing behind me, where Nisa stood, the starlight gleaming faintly on her hair. After that I was more inclined to put faith in her words, because a fair woman often tries to bend a man to her will by tears; but if she weeps after his departure, it must be that she has cause for tears.

"So thou has taken service with a new mistress," I remarked to Sher Jan.

"Aye, indeed, my lord." He grinned up at me. "Oh the excellent food, and the wealth to be had!"

He had lingered at Nisa's house on the street of the steps and had wheedled himself into the attention of her major-domo. There was no good in reproaching him for turning against me; although it irked me that he should have handled my sword.

"And thy mistress," I hazarded, "hath found a new lord to serve."

But Sher Jan's tongue would not start wagging. He conducted me past the outer sentries and commended me to the mercy of God with great dignity.

AS IT happened I had no need of parley at the Kandahar gate. Torches were lighted over the gate tower, and I was challenged an arrow's flight distant.

When I spoke my name, the small door beside the gate was opened, and I led in my horse—a shaggy mountain pony, worth very little.

“Mahabat Khan is above,” said one of the Mogul soldiers, eying the pony and its saddle without approval. “He gave command to send thee up.”

It seemed to me that the custom of the guard had changed in the last day and night; but I was grateful that Mahabat Khan should be at the gate. He was sitting on a couch in the chamber of the tower above the arch, by an embrasure that gave him sight of the road of approach. He looked graver than before, with deeper lines about his eyes.

“My men were searching for thee, Daril,” he said at once. “How in the name of God didst thou get out of the city?”

“In a camel’s howdah,” I answered, but he did not laugh.

He was in no mood for trifling. I told my tale with few words, watching his brow darken the while. At the end he struck his hip impatiently.

“Am I to shepherd witless minstrels and doddering *hakims*? Where are the tokens?”

He glanced at the emerald and laid it aside, but the tiny message tube he turned over in his fingers before withdrawing the cap. He shook out a roll of paper no larger than the written prayers that some physicians give their patients to swallow by way of cure. It had only a line of writing on it, in a fine hand, without flourishes.

“A woman wrote this,” he said. “It bears witness to thee, Daril, in this wise:

“The Arab *hakim* is a speaker of truth, and the hour of fate is the second sunrise.”

Again he glanced at the tube, which had elaborate ornament inscribed upon it.

“How large is that encampment?” He used the word *lashgar*, which may mean the traveling camp of a lord, or the gathering place of a tribe.

I told him that they had led me out by the horse lines, and I had seen little. But

I thought that several hundred men might be in those tents. At this he nodded.

“And the visitors who came to look into thy tent—what didst thou see of them?”

“They walked carelessly, spoke harshly and wore costly attire.”

“What is thy thought concerning them?”

“Mahabat Khan,” I said, “at first I thought that some of al Khimar’s bands had made me captive. But the men of that *lashgar* were not Pathans. I do not think the girl Nisa serves this prophet.”

Again he nodded.

“They, who hold Kushal, are Persians. While I sat beside thee on the height behind Kandahar, in the clear light of early morning, I saw at a great distance a long line of men and beasts moving up from the western defiles into the plain. They were soon lost to sight among the trees.”

“Eh, then they must be the hunters—the camp al Khimar saw in his dream.”

“Or otherwise. They are at least Persians who have crossed the frontier and kept very much to themselves.” He mused a while, pulling at his mustache. “I sent two of my troopers out to look at them from a distance; my men reported that they number more than a thousand, and have baggage enough for a journey to Isfahan.”

I wanted to ask why such men should have come up into the plain, without seeking Kandahar, and why they should desire Mahabat Khan to come to them. Then I remembered that al Khimar had promised his hill people that they should plunder this *lashgar*.

“It is well for al Khimar that these Persians have come into the plain; for, if his men had attacked such a strong force, the Pathans would have been cut up and driven away empty handed, and they might then have made al Khimar the victim of their disappointment.”

Mahabat Khan looked at me with straightforward eyes.

“Daril, I think thou hast spent more time in the saddle of war than upon the rug of the physician.”

He told me to go and sleep, but not to

leave the tower. So I unrolled a rug and lay down by the charcoal brazier in the corner. The stone beneath the rug was both hard and cold, and the smoke from the charcoal made me cough, so I did not sleep at first. Mahabat Khan called at once to the men below, and several of them came and saluted him. What orders he gave I know not, but they went away with the manner of men who have much to do in little time.

Horses were led out below, and I heard the little door open and shut. The horses trotted away and began to gallop, before they were out of hearing. Mahabat Khan mused awhile, leaning in the embrasure, looking up at the stars. Then, without calling any one, he blew out the candles and threw himself down on the divan.

When he heard me moving about, trying to ease my bones on the stones, he laughed a little.

"These Persians have made Baki fearful," he remarked. "Also the planets foretell calamity to come—so he calculates. He is drinking wine and making his calculations over again in his tower, after praying me to take charge of the city gate."

"And thou?" I made bold to ask.

"Eh, the stars tell the hour of the night, but men make or break themselves."

He said nothing of Kushal, or of what he meant to do; before long he was breathing deep. I do not think he had had any sleep since two nights before.

Just before I fell asleep the thought came to me, as such slight things do when the mind is empty and drowsy, that Baki had warned Mahabat Khan that, if he sent a messenger to al Khimar, he would have not one but two blood feuds on his hands. Indeed, matters had turned out as Baki had predicted.

I heard a stir below us before dawn, and Mahabat Khan rose and went out quietly. It was too cold to sleep any more, so I sat up and fed more charcoal to the brazier and became aware of excitement that grew around me as the light increased.

Because Mahabat Khan had commanded it, I remained in the tower—that is,

within call of the tower. The gate was still closed and held in strength by the garrison—three-score Moguls, short and stocky men, in good chain mail and leather, wearing burnished steel helmets. The Sirdar's escort of Rajputs sat by their saddled horses, with the air of men awaiting a summons. To them I went, seeking Dost Muhammad, the leader of the escort, who was striding back and forth, examining girths and stirrup leathers,

Dost Muhammad stood even taller than I, by reason of his white silk *pugri*; he was a man gaunt and restless as a racing horse and almost as sparing of words. His beard, brushed to either side his chin, was streaked with white. Verily, with his feathers and his stiff muslin skirt projecting out from his knees, and his white leather slippers and the tiny jeweled hilt of his light sword, he seemed to be robed for an audience at court rather than service of any kind. Yet Kushal had told me that he was terrible with the sword, when aroused. When I asked whether he was in command here, at the gate, he looked down at me, as if searching for insult, and said that Rajputs never mounted guard.

Then he remembered that I was the guest of his lord and he began to explain what all Kandahar was talking about. The men of the garrison sent out by Mahabat Khan last night—the party I had heard riding off—had scouted around the Persian *lashgar*. They had brought back three prisoners, sentries carried off from an outer post. These captives proved to be Red Hats, soldiers of the great shah of Persia. They had been persuaded—Dost Muhammad did not choose to explain in what manner—to talk and had admitted that twelve hundred or more soldiers of the shah were in that camp, commanded by royal officers.

The Red Hats swore that they did not know why they had been led beyond the frontier, although they believed that the hunting was only a pretense. They swore likewise, very earnestly, that their leaders had no designs on Kandahar, because no artillery or siege tools had been brought along.

"There are no greater liars anywhere," said Dost Muhammad, "than these dogs of Persians. Still, it must be true that their camp is a military camp, and it is well indeed for the Mogul governor that the Sirdar of Ind is here."

"Why?" I asked, for the captain of the Rajputs was too blunt to relish anything but plain words.

"When the eagle is perched on the edge of his nest, the hawk keeps its distance," he smiled.

He added that Kandahar, being the gateway in the mountains between Persia and Ind, was greatly desired by the shah. For the present the shah and the Mogul were at peace, but it was the uneasy peace of powerful emperors, who complimented each other while they had their hands on their swords.

"Nay," said Dost Muhammad gravely, "those Persians have crept up to pluck Kandahar from Baki."

"What will the governor do?"

The tall Rajput had all the contempt of his race for the man of peace and trade.

"Baki the Wise! I went before him with the Sirdar after the dawn prayer, and he was like a man struck on the head. He begged the Sirdar to defend Kandahar, and hastened off to eat opium and pray."

Evidently Baki thought that calamity was descending upon him! Now it was clear why Kushal had been carried off. The leaders of the Persians had heard of the Sirdar's presence in Kandahar and wished to get him out of the walls, in their hands, away from the garrison. The Sirdar of Ind would be a splendid hostage, in their camp. But if he chose to defend Kandahar against them, their task would be no easy one.

"No doubt," I said, "they will pay the woman, Nisa, a fine price for bringing them the songmaker."

Although Dost Muhammad would admit no knowledge of this woman, it seemed to me that she had planned the trap for the Sirdar, knowing that Kushal was his friend—knowing that he would risk his own life to aid Kushal.

Mahabat Khan, by his prompt sortie

of the night, had uncovered this much of their plans. But what he would do now, I did not know. With three hundred Mogul men-at-arms and a handful of Rajput riders, he could not attempt to rescue Kushal; nor could he hope to defend the outer wall of the city against an attack of twelve hundred Persian Red Hats. Then, too, he had to watch al Khimar, who was no doubt hovering like a vulture in his hills.

I saw only one thing for Mahabat Khan to do—to retire with the governor into the citadel and try to defend it as best he could. But Dost Muhammad chose to mock at this plan.

"When did an eagle fly into a cage?"

Indeed, Mahabat Khan did otherwise—and of all things this seemed to me the most mad and vain. He rode up to us alone, but clad in a cloth-of-silver robe of honor. He chose me and Dost Muhammad and two troopers from the Rajputs. He left the gate in charge of a Mogul officer and, when all the men of his cavalcade had mounted and reined behind him, trotted off toward the citadel.

In the garden by Baki's tower he dismounted, leaving our horses with the other Rajputs, who looked crestfallen when they were ordered to remain in the garden until his return. With only Dost Muhammad and me he walked under the trees to a narrow door like the one beside the main gate. This he unlocked and locked again after us, confiding the key to one of the troopers.

We had come out into a shadow ravine and, before the Sirdar had gone a hundred paces, I knew the place. It was the same ravine by which we had come down from the heights the day before. Mahabat Khan, looking neither to right nor left, began to climb up among the boulders.

BEFORE the shadows turned, we reached the spot where I had dozed during our flight from the Pathan's *sangar*. Here the Sirdar halted to gaze down at the city and the distant plain, which was motionless under a burning sun. No caravans moved along the road; no

horsemen entered and left the villages. As birds quiet their noise and take shelter before a storm, the people of the valley had withdrawn from sight to await events. Mahabat Khan looked at everything and turned, striding into the rock strewn gully that led to the caverns.

"May God prosper it!" I muttered, thinking of what we had left behind us in that place.

"Are there horses ahead?" Dost Muhammad wondered aloud.

Unlike the Sirdar he hated to walk; indeed, he limped already in his light slippers, and the other Rajputs eyed the rocky way with little favor. They would rather have galloped in the saddle down to Satan than have climbed afoot to paradise! Mahabat Khan had given them a half-dozen split pine torches to carry, while he let me walk unburdened.

"Where is he going?" I asked.

"To preach to some hill tribes," Dost Muhammad muttered, "some men of that prophet."

W'allahi! It seemed to me then that Baki was wiser than we. I would have relished both wine and opium before entering that pit again.

"Yea," I said to the Rajput captain, "there are horses beyond us, but it is likely thou and I will descend into our graves before we mount a stirrup again."

This prospect of danger put an end to his grumbling. The hillmen he held in utter scorn. But it seemed to me that Mahabat Khan might stroke a wounded panther more easily than talk to those Pathans again. He must have counted on al Khimar's absence from the valley this afternoon and on persuading the tribes to take his side in the coming struggle.

It is written that God deals lovingly with the bold of heart, and many times since have I thought of that saying. Mahabat Khan staked his own life and ours that day, and God put a weapon into his hand. Nay, he did not look for it!

It was Dost Muhammad who caught my arm and whispered—

"What is this?"

I looked up and saw, a bowshot ahead

of us, al Khimar sitting on a boulder in the gully. He wore the same brown mantle and wide green turban and veil, and his back was toward us. He sat like a man who rests beside the path he follows.

Mahabat Khan saw him in the same instant and sprang forward. He made no sound, but one of the troopers, shifting the torches on his shoulder, made some noise and al Khimar looked over his arm at us. At once he sprang to his feet and ran. His mantle floating behind him he skimmed among the boulders, holding something in his arms.

"Take him!" Mahabat Khan cried to his followers.

But before we had run ten bowshots, al Khimar vanished. We saw him disappear into a narrow cleft of the rock that walled the end of the gully. This was the place where we had come out under the stars. At the cleft, Mahabat Khan checked us, bidding us light the torches.

It was no easy task. Mahabat Khan went on into the cleft, and Dost Muhammad knelt, cursing the damp wind of the place, while he struck flint against steel, dashing little sparks upon a wad of dry hemp that he placed in the end of the pine sticks. Many sparks died before the hemp began to smoke, and the flame caught slowly upon the wood. Then Dost Muhammad seized the torch and waved it until the fire sputtered and flared.

Still waving it, he ran into the rock passage, his men after him, and I following. We did not see anything ahead for a while, but when we came down over the ledges, we made out two figures hastening below us.

Al Khimar must have had eyes that could see in the dark, or he knew every step of the way. He might have had a torch or lantern of his own hidden somewhere, but he had not waited to light it, thinking that we could not follow in the darkness.

When Mahabat Khan and I had felt our way out of those accursed caverns, the path had seemed endless and terrifying. In reality it was not far to the chasm, where the rock bridge led across.

Guided by our torch, Mahabat Khan was only a spear's thrust behind the veiled figure. Al Khimar ran out upon the narrow bridge and slipped or stumbled. Suddenly he screamed, falling to his knees and clutching that which he held still in his arms. The shrill cry echoed and quivered in the chasm, and Dost Muhammad cursed aloud.

Sword in hand, the Sirdar bent over the kneeling figure. He reached down and jerked off the veil and stood thus without moving. When we came up, Dost Muhammad held the torch high, and stared at the terrified face of the kneeling man.

Eh, we saw before us Baki the Wise. His eyes were fixed on the darkness beneath him, his whole body rigid with terror.

After a moment the Sirdar thrust back his sword and helped Baki to our side of the chasm.

"Light another torch," he bade us, "and retire beyond hearing until I summon you."

When this was done, we went and sat on a ridge of rock, breathing heavily, staring at the tall and gleaming figure of the Sirdar and the man who crouched at his feet.

What they said I know not. Mahabat Khan seemed to ask many questions, and Baki, after a space, began to complain shrilly. Swiftly Mahabat Khan cut him short and called to the Rajput captain.

The Sirdar looked and spoke like a man who sees his way clear before him, after searching through darkness and uncertainty. Although he was no longer on the brink of the chasm, Baki still labored with his fear. His eyes gleamed, when Mahabat Khan took from his arms the bundle that he had carried during his flight.

It was a gray sack of coarse cloth. The Sirdar thrust his hand into it, drawing out a little heap of silver coins. At these Baki stared anxiously, and I wondered what strange hope he might have in this money—sitting thus after that wild chase through the gut of the mountain. His face fell, when Mahabat Khan handed the sack to me.

"Nay!" cried Baki. "Nay, that is mine!"

He trembled and kept stretching out a thin hand toward the sack. Mahabat Khan looked down at him in silence for a moment, while the governor of Kandahar put forth his hand and drew it back like a child, desiring something greatly, yet fearing to be punished.

"Art thou," the Sirdar asked presently, "the servant of the emperor, to whom a trust was given?"

Baki nodded several times.

"Then let there be an end of al Khimar," the Sirdar said. "And do thou yield to me the command of the men and treasure of Kandahar, until such time as thou canst go before the emperor and justify thyself."

Again Baki assented, his eyes still fixed upon the sack in my hands. But the tall Pathan was not content with this.

"Wilt thou yield thy trust to me?" he asked again.

"Into thy hands," muttered Baki, "I give the government of Kandahar."

He glanced up at us with such malice that Dost Muhammad swore into his beard, and I felt misgiving. Truly, in that day of calamity few men would have wished to take the reins Baki let fall.

"And I accept the responsibility," answered Mahabat Khan.

At once he gave an order to his two troopers, to take Baki back with them, going slowly along the heights and not descending to the garden gate of Kandahar until sunset. He bade them escort Baki to his tower, taking care to veil his face, and to keep him there, a captive, through the night.

Immediately Dost Muhammad voiced an objection.

"Mahabat Khan, the follower of this man, slew Rai Singh. Let him come with us and make atonement."

The Sirdar did not reprove his officer for this speech.

"Within an hour," he said, "the murderer of Rai Singh shall face my sword, or thine."

Dost Muhammad uttered an exclamation, and touched his sword hilt, stepping

back. Then the troopers took one torch and Baki, and they hastened back, desiring to be out of the cavern. Mahabat Khan and the old Rajput and I went forward.

Nay, I would have chosen to go with the troopers. Surely Baki, who had taken the veil of al Khimar, had laid many plots, and Shamil likewise. That Baki was a coward made matters no easier for us, because the intrigues of a weak and covetous man do more harm than the scheming of a bold rogue.

I thought that Mahabat Khan was taking a mad risk, to go among the Pathans. Baki had tricked him and nearly slain him twice. Indeed, Mahabat Khan was not the match of these men, much less the Persians, at scheming. By good fortune, when he ventured into the heights, he had made Baki captive. What more could he do?

But Mahabat Khan was a leader of cavalry, a man of his word, faithful alike to his lord and his men. He saw only one thing to do—to go forward until he was overcome. And God had given him one weapon—the knowledge that Baki had played the role of al Khimar. This weapon he used in a very simple way.

IT IS ill to rouse sleeping dogs. The Pathans in the prophet's gorge were sleeping wolves!

Standing in the deep shadow of the outer cavern, we could see all of that great pit of the hills. It looked different by day than by night. The sun struck against the lofty cliff of dark red limestone, filling the bed of the pit with a ruddy half light. The gleam of dazzling snow on sentinel peaks far overhead filled our eyes.

Perhaps six hundred tribesmen sat and slept and gossiped and ate, scattered in clan groups among their horses. Some were testing sword edges, or binding feathers upon fresh arrows. Others overhauled the flints and priming-holes of a few firelocks. The women and boys were making ready to bundle up their belongings on pack animals, to follow down behind the warriors, in the raid of the coming night.

Upon the opposite ridge, where we had first seen the *sangar* stood a solitary sentry, wrapped in sheepskins. I saw the one eyed Artaban chewing the last meat off a sheep's bone and then wiping his fingers on a passing dog. At his side squatted the red bearded Shamil, casting anxious glances at times toward the cavern, as if he expected al Khimar to appear.

Eh, they were like drowsy wolves, wary of the unknown, more than ready to quest, to prey when roused, a pack that awaited its leader. And in full sight of them Mahabat Khan stepped out upon the boulder with the Rajput officer at his side.

"O ye men of the hills!" he cried his greeting, in their speech.

At first the nearest children bobbed up, to stare and run from him. Warriors turned on their elbows and grasped for their weapons, when they saw the glittering garments of the two strangers. Men rose to their feet and gradually the murmur of the camp died into silence. In truth, they were too amazed to understand what was before them.

"I come from al Khimar," Mahabat Khan cried in his deep voice.

This loosed the shackles of their amazement. Shamil sidled in, peering up at the boulder from his slits of eyes. Artaban grunted and pushed his way toward us, and presently a mass of them elbowed and swayed before the boulder.

"Who art thou?" demanded one.

"The son of Ghuyar, chief of the Lodi people, Sirdar of Ind, under authority of the emperor!"

There was silence anew, while they pondered this, and then a great outcry of amazement. Mahabat Khan addressed them in their own Pushtu, and many were found to tell me later the words he spoke. Not a man or child of them but had heard of the battles won and the honors gained by the soldier of the hills. Only there were no Lodi clansmen in that throng, and these men who had gathered at al Khimar's summons were resentful of authority and suspicious of new developments. They had the feeling of being tricked or

trapped, and mutters of anger rose and swelled, until Mahabat Khan flung up his arm.

"Are ye wolves or men? Where are your leaders? Set forward the leaders, for I have come to speak at a *jirhgar* and not with wolves!"

A *jirhgar* is a council of elders and chieftains, with all the tribes listening. And because they were curious to hear what message Mahabat Khan might have for them, they began to call for their chief men to come forth. Artaban and half a dozen others ranged themselves under the boulder, and Shamil joined the group, peering up under his shaggy brows.

Mahabat Khan would not go down until they were seated, all six hundred of them, and then he went leisurely and sat upon a large rock, his hands clasped over his knee. As the hillmen were squatted on the ground, this set him a little over them, as if he spoke from a throne, and increased his dignity.

The straightforward manner of the man had calmed them. They saw that he had only one or two followers. I lingered in the shadow of the cavern. Their curiosity grew mighty indeed. Mahabat Khan had stepped out of the cave where al Khimar was supposed to dwell; he had said that he came from the prophet. I think only Shamil recognized him as the Pathan who had ventured hither the night before last, and Shamil, with Baki absent, hesitated to cry out his knowledge. The others, seeing him clad in this new fashion, in daylight, thought not at all of the shaggy Mahabat Khan who had come among them by firelight.

"Al Khimar," the Sirdar said at once, "hath given me his place among ye. I have come to lead ye to a battle this night, to the spoil that al Khimar truly foresaw."

W'allahi! When a blunt man speaks thus, who does not believe? A schemer might have argued, and a prophet have exhorted in vain. But the Pathans, drawing a long breath, became attentive. Probably al Khimar had kept them waiting overlong.

"I shall remain among ye," he said again, "I alone, until the end of things."

They did not believe this at first; but, as he spoke on, they began to consider and to believe.

Of all things he told them the truth—that twelve hundred Persians had been sent by the shah to take Kandahar by a trick; that this force was too great for the hillmen to attack alone; that, besides, the Persians were now camped in the plain out beyond Kandahar.

He described the camp, as his scouts had seen it. Then he talked about the great shah of Persia, revealing his trickery and cruelty, his way of venturing where he was not known and putting to death all who offended him. Yea, the Sirdar showed them that with the Persians quartered in Kandahar, the men of the hills would be hunted and driven from their *sangars*.

"My brother-in-arms, the songmaker, is captive in that camp," he said suddenly, "and at the next dawn the Persians will begin flaying him alive, unless I yield myself also to them. And I mean to be in that camp before sunrise."

They could understand now his need of making war upon the Persians. This was well, because otherwise they would have suspected a trick.

"If ye will," he cried very loud, "ye can take me and sell me to the men of the shah."

This was what they had been considering, but they denied it loudly at his challenge.

"Nay, Mahabat Khan," declared Artaban, "we are not traitors. But we are too few to go against twelve hundred."

Then the Sirdar revealed the plan he had made. He knew the Persians would not move out until dawn, because they would wait that long to see if he would give himself up. He meant to have the Moguls of the garrison sally out in the last hours of darkness and make an onset upon the *lashgar*.

Upon the heels of this charge he would lead the Pathans to attack the tents, thus taking the Persians by surprise at two points.

Eh, he knew these hillmen. The plan warmed their hearts. They would not have advanced alone against regular soldiery; but to dash in on the flank of the Moguls—to slash and loot among the tents!

“*Hai-a!*” they murmured, beginning to be eager.

Then it was that Shamil acted. He had waited until he saw the issue going against him, had waited vainly for al Khimar to appear. Now he sprang up and pointed at the Sirdar.

“Fools! This is the governor’s spy who tried to seize al Khimar.”

He had waited too long. Artaban was thinking now, not of the Veiled One, but of the coming raid.

“Nay,” they cried, “this is the Sirdar of Ind.”

Mahabat Khan took matters in his own hand.

“Choose, ye men of the hills, will ye go against the Persians, as Pathans should? Or lurk here like the thieves of al Khimar?”

The chieftain of the Yuzufi was the first to spring up.

“By God, I will go with thee!”

“And I!” cried others, not willing to be thought lacking in courage. Many said nothing, but Mahabat Khan gave them no chance to quarrel about it.

“Will ye have me for leader, or him?” And he pointed at the enraged Shamil.

Now it is a strange thing but true that men are ever willing to pull down an old leader for a new one, and these Pathans loved both daring and dignity. A moment ago they might have slashed Mahabat Khan to pieces, but now they rallied to him.

“With thee will we go!”

“Then I shall be obeyed, from now—from this instant!”

His dark eyes swept over them confidently. And Shamil, struggling with his anger, learned the truth of the saying that a man who can not master himself may not lead others.

“Wait!” He tried a new course, changing his words. “Wait for the coming of

the Veiled One and hear his command!”

“Then would ye wait long,” smiled the Sirdar, “for al Khimar is sitting with Baki the governor in the tower of Kandahar. As for thee—” he turned swiftly upon Shamil—“may God judge thee, for thou hast slain a man of mine, taking him unaware. For thee there is but one choice. Wilt thou draw thy sword against me, or Dost Muhammad?”

The captain of the Rajputs stirred and came forward.

“Is this the one who struck down Rai Singh?”

“In the bazaar,” assented the Sirdar. “I saw his face, and there are not two such beards in these mountains.”

When Shamil appealed to the Pathans, they jeered at him. In truth, they had not known of the killing in Kandahar. They cared not at all about the life of Rai Singh, but they knew the law of the punishment of blood. Any relative or companion-in-arms of the dead man was privileged to draw his sword against Shamil, and the red beard must look to his own life.

The law of the hills is inexorable—that no man may shrink from his quarrel. Even Shamil saw the uselessness of appeal, and his face grew hard. He looked once toward the cavern; his eyes no longer drooped, but glared hatred. No doubt he thought al Khimar had betrayed him.

In the end he chose to fight Dost Muhammad. Mahabat Khan seated himself on his stone. True, the Rajput seemed both lank and old, and his small sword was lighter than Shamil’s long *tulwar*. But Dost Muhammad grinned at the choice, motioning back the hillmen who thronged about him.

“Thou shalt taste what is stored up for thee,” he said to the red beard.

I wondered what Mahabat Khan would do if Shamil vanquished the Rajput, but he seemed not at all concerned. The hillmen thought the more of him because he had been willing to take Rai Singh’s death as his own quarrel.

“Al Khimar hath set thee upon me,”

Shamil muttered, and seemed willing to say more, but Artaban mocked him; and presently, the space before the rock being cleared, Shamil fell to watching the Rajput who had drawn his sword and stood in readiness.

The light blade of Dost Muhammad was a *khandā*, double edged and finely balanced, of blue steel. The *tulwar* of Shamil was longer and much heavier at the head—a weapon made for a wide slash. As to strength, I could not judge. Dost Muhammad stood almost rigid, balanced on his thin feet, while Shamil moved about restlessly as a chained bear, his jaw outthrust, his heavy shoulders moving under his tunic.

“*Inshallah!*” cried Artaban. “As God wills it let the end come!”

The two swordsmen watched each other as keenly as hawks. Being afoot and with curved blades, the struggle would be decided swiftly. Shrewdly, each waited for the other to leap in, while the tribes breathed heavily, and jostled, not to lose a single glimpse of the two men.

Suddenly Dost Muhammad paced forward, his curved blade held at his hip. This spurred on Shamil who cried out and ran in, his mantle flying, his *tulwar* flashing out and down. The Rajput thrust out his long arm and parried, letting the long blade slide off his *khandā*.

“*Hai!*” cried Artaban. “The stork wards off the hawk!”

Shamil pretended then to rush in, twice, without being able to draw Dost Muhammad into a false guard. Then he slashed at the head and changed direction in midair, to strike the Rajput’s slender hips. Again Dost Muhammad parried; and now the two blades sang and clashed so swiftly that I could not follow thrust and cut.

I saw that the tall Rajput walked forward slowly, and that by degrees he forced Shamil to guard himself. The *tulwar* man scowled, springing back again and again to escape those light cuts of the *khandā*. Then he saw the folly of falling upon the defense, and leaped forward, his long blade singing in the air.

Dost Muhammad sprang this time to meet him. The swords clashed and parted, and clashed anew. Shamil cried out, and swung up his *tulwar* to put all of his strength in one slash.

Instead of drawing back, the Rajput stepped in, his blade flicking sidewise across his enemy’s breast. Shamil made his slash indeed, but the *tulwar* slowed in the air and fell from his hands. The front of his tunic under the ribs suddenly became red. The *khandā* had touched him and passed half through his body.

Dost Muhammad laughed and stood to one side, lowering his point. Shamil, dying upon his feet, gripped his breast, his knees sinking under him. His red beard stood out strangely, as his face became bloodless.

I looked at the Rajput. He was breathing evenly, wiping clean his blade with a cloth he had picked up from the ground.

“By God!” cried the one eyed Artaban. “This man has held a sword before now!”

THE SLAYING of Shamil silenced any who might have sided against Mahabat Khan. When the Sirdar told them that he sought for true men who would not turn away from weapons, and that men of another mind need not come with him, the Pathans all cried that they would follow him.

So he drew apart while they made ready, and Dost Muhammad refreshed himself with wine. He took me aside with him and told me the secret of Baki.

Baki the Wise was a man of a single craving. He coveted wealth—gold pieces and silver. He stinted himself to gather in money.

And when he had found the revenues of Kandahar yielded little more than the emperor’s tithe, he had bethought him of the hill tribes. Shamil, a merchant of Kandahar, had told the governor of this valley, of their favorite camping place and of the passage through the mountain that led to it. Shamil alone knew of this passage. They knew the superstition of the hills, and planned between them for Baki to appear in the valley, veiled, so that he

would not be recognized. Baki had once been a reader of the Koran and knew its verses by heart.

He found that the tribes were afraid of him, and he gained real influence over them by foretelling the coming of certain caravans—a thing well known to him in Kandahar. He gathered tribute from the tribes, while he held them in leash by promising to lead them to war. Shamil, abiding with them, watched their moods.

Baki could come and go unseen from his tower, by the little door. So much he had confessed to Mahabat Khan, when he was caught in the caverns. As to the bag of money, he had said he meant to give it to the Pathans, but more probably he had been taking it from the tower to a safer hiding place. It was not all his money.

The coming of the Persians had found him unprepared to make any defense. He had thought of loosing the tribes upon the camp, but had lacked courage to lead them. Truly, a man who gathers wealth is fearful of harm!

"He was taken like a hare, running from one hole to another," I said.

"But his scheming opened a way to strike at our enemy," said Mahabat Khan, and when Dost Muhammad came up he gave us careful orders.

He bade us return at once to Kandahar by the caverns. He wrote out an order for us to give the leader of the Mogul garrison. All the garrison was to be led out under Dost Muhammad and the Mogul captain, about the fourth hour of the night. All must be mounted. With the first trace of light over the plain, they were to attack the Persian camp from the Kandahar side.

He would lead the Pathans down the *tangi* and the river valley, and be in position to attack from the west at the same time. Dost Muhammad listened intently and nodded, saying briefly—"On my honor!" He asked how many men should be left to keep the citadel.

"One," said Mahabat Khan grimly, "to watch Baki."

Dost Muhammad looked at me instantly, saying nothing. I knew that he

meant to put me in place of his men, who would not relish being left behind. The prospect filled him with quiet joy, and he was only disconsolate because we could not ride back to the city.

He saluted Mahabat Khan and turned away. At the cave mouth we both looked back, beholding only the tumultuous preparations of the tribes—and the cold body with the red beard, outstretched by the boulder. So elated were we that we did not reflect how unruly were these same Pathans, and how Mahabat Khan would be cut off from all word from us.

"*Hai, Daril,*" cried Dost Muhammad, "the sniff of a battle gives life to thy aged bones."

"Nay," I said, "my old bones rejoice because life is in them after I had thought myself dead."

MORE time had passed than we thought, and it was after sunset before we reached the last height. The descent in growing darkness was both slow and painful, and more than once we went astray. By the time we beheld the wall loom up before us, Dost Muhammad was cursing by all the ninety and nine holy names and more names of Hindu gods. The gate was unlocked, and we had to shout before servants came with torches and went to fetch the Rajputs with the keys. Dost Muhammad was fuming voicelessly, asking how in the name of all the gods he was to rouse and muster and lead out three hundred men at the time appointed. He calmed a little, when he found it was no more than the third hour of the night. He hastened to the tower where, as I had suspected, he bade me take the responsibility of Baki, so he would have all his men.

This was a mistake, and I was doubtful about standing guard over the governor of Kandahar in his own tower. True, Baki was still veiled, his arms bound, and the tower chamber darkened. I did not think he would wish to reveal himself in this garb.

"Send me the Bedouins and Abu Ash-tar," I responded, "and I will remain here."

Full of his coming battle, Dost Muhammad hastened off. Presently the eleven Bedouins appeared, full of curiosity.

They all peered at Baki in the starlight of a window and satisfied themselves that this was indeed al Khimar. To put an end to their questions, I invented a fearful story of how the Veiled One had been chased through caverns that led to the underworld, and how Mahabat Khan had fought with him on a bridge of rock over a bottomless pit.

This gave them something to think about, for each one was trying to memorize the story, to improve upon it at the next telling. Baki understood me, but had nothing to say.

After a while I, too, became thoughtful. After all, of what was Baki guilty? We did not know for certain that he had sent Shamil to slay Mahabat Khan. Indeed, why should he have desired the death of the Sirdar?

In the hurry of events at the gorge I had not spoken of this; now I dared not ask Baki about it, before the Bedouins. It seemed to me that the prisoner was restless and breathing heavily, and that he roused up whenever hastening footsteps passed under the tower. Dost Muhammad had told the Moguls that Baki was taking opium, which was a well known failing of the governor. No one came to ask about him, and presently all was quiet around the tower.

Then this quiet was broken horribly by the voice of the captive. He cried out in a shrill whimper that made the Bedouins gasp.

"*Ai-a!* This is a night of fear. The wolves are sitting on their haunches and blood will fill the gullies before dawn. Oh, the terror!"

He continued to moan and exclaim, rocking back and forth.

"May God forgive me, I see the death of a thousand souls! I see shadows riding in a host through the plain!"

Then he sighed deeply and flung himself back on the couch.

"May God be merciful to me—it was not my doing. May their blood not be on my head."

"Allah!" whispered the blind Abu Ashtar. "He prophesies!"

At first it had startled me, until I reflected that Baki was no doubt playing a trick of some kind, to excite the Arabs or gain his freedom. But it was otherwise. The man was gripped by a great terror, and so real was his fear that we began to share it.

"By God, Daril," said Abu Ashtar again, "this is truth indeed. What is happening in the plain?"

Baki kept on moaning weakly, at times starting to speak and then checking himself to break into new lament. The Bedouins were thrilled.

"The garrison is gone out," muttered Baki, and turned his head toward me. "Has not Mahabat Khan led down the Pathans to attack the *lashgar*?"

Since Dost Muhammad had spoken before him, I saw no good in trying to conceal our plans, and told him what was passing.

"Then they are doomed," cried Baki and, as if breaking the chains that held him silent, he cried out harshly—

"You do not know that Shah Abbas, king of kings, lord of Iran and Irak, and master of Persia is in that *lashgar*!"

For a moment I did not understand the significance of his words and then I doubted that this could be true.

"That is surely a lie!" I said.

"By the triple oath I swear it," he moaned, and then angry impatience swept over him. "Daril, the Shah is in that *lashgar*. The Persians Mahabat Khan captured told him many things, but not that."

I was too astounded to wonder then how Baki came to know this. For a while I pondered, the Bedouins, breathless with interest, pressing closer not to miss a word. *W'allahi*, they thought that this was indeed a noble prophecy!

A little at a time I pieced things together in my mind. Nisa, with her messenger pigeons flying from the west—her eagerness to make Mahabat Khan captive—her promise that a king would be surety for the life of Mahabat Khan, if he

gave himself up. Nay, she was one of the women spies of the Persian court; and she had been willing to trick Kushal to aid the ambition of Shah Abbas.

So the whole matter became clear in mind, as a mirage drifting away from the hot plain shows the bare rocks and gullies that are really there. It was like the Persians to plan such a trick—to pretend that the shah had been hunting in these mountains, that the shah was really entertaining Mahabat Khan as a guest. But once in Kandahar with his troops, the gateway of the hills would be Persian indeed, and not soon would Mahabat Khan win his freedom.

"Fool!" cried Baki, trembling. "Canst thou not see what is about to happen? The Persians will beat off the Moguls and those hillmen; they will follow up to Kandahar and enter it easily. They will come here and take thee and set thee on a stake, on a greased stake, to die slowly, for the length of a day."

"Allah!" breathed the Bedouins, agape.

Verily, this was about to happen. I knew well that Shah Abbas would not venture over the frontier without a strong guard of his warlike nobles, the *atabegs*, and hundreds of his veteran mailed cavalry, the *kurshis*, and his men-at-arms, the Red Hats, who would rather slay than plunder, and rather torture than slay.

When I thought of the fury of the shah and his men, surprised and attacked in his camp, my bowels became weak and ached mightily.

"It is certain," cried Baki, "that he has other forces in support across the frontier within a day's ride. There is only one thing to be done, Daril. I have gold—some gold, hidden here in the tower. I will show thee where it is, and thou and these Arabs can take it, and bear me across the hills into Ind. We can take a boat on the Indus and be safe from all harm. But we must hasten!"

Indeed, I was tempted. Who would not be tempted, knowing that this miser must have gold enough hidden away to yield us luxury for years. No doubt he would try to trick us again, but the Bed-

ouins and I would know how to deal with him.

"We can leave the city now without hindrance," whispered Baki, still shaken by his fear. "But in two hours it may be too late."

I went to the embrasure and looked out. Clouds hid the stars and an icy wind swept and swayed through the gardens of the almost deserted citadel. There was no telling the hour. I knew it must be long after midnight, and that the air was full of a rising storm. So much the better, if we fled.

I had not sworn to guard Baki, yet I had promised Dost Muhammad to remain here. Was Mahabat Khan my lord, that I should hazard torture to hold his prisoner here? Yet I owed him the duty of companionship and of salt. I thought of Mahabat Khan riding into the storm with his wild hillmen at his back, and it sickened my spirit to leave him thus.

"O Father of the Blind," I cried to Abu Ashtar, "what thing wilt thou do in this situation?"

He answered promptly—

"Daril, we can not fly, leaving our tents and women out there."

When Baki would have spoken, I checked him. A thought had come to me, a memory of words that Baki himself had spoken to the Pathans when he exhorted them to war against the Persians.

"Saidst thou not, in the valley," I asked him, "'It is written: Thinkest thou that thy wealth will deliver thee, when thy deeds destroy thee?'"

"I said that, indeed, but the Pathans are fools to be swayed by such words. Thou and I, Daril, are otherwise. We are men of wisdom."

"God forbid!" I responded, "that my wisdom should be kin to thine. I am a man of peace, but I have never reined my horse from a place where my companions tasted death."

It was clear to me then that I must go at once and warn Mahabat Khan of what Baki had revealed. But how? I wished then for a Rajput trooper. It is easy to sit by and see others hold the reins of

command, but it is far from easy to take up the reins they let fall! The Bedouins were waiting for me to decide. They longed for gold; greater than their longing was their fear of what was breeding in the storm.

"Find horses!" I bade them. "Find and saddle my mare, and tarry not."

Some of them departed at once, being more than willing to do this. In truth, they knew where to look for mounts, because within the time it takes to light a fire they were back at the tower with thirteen mounts saddled in every fashion.

"Nay," I cried, "what is this? We can not take al Khimar with us. Some few of ye must remain here with him."

All speaking at once, they refused unconditionally to stay in the tower; even Abu Ashtar refused. They were like sheep that would not separate in a storm. So we had to bind Baki more securely and fill his mouth with a cloth, stripping off his turban and binding his jaw tight with its long cloth. At least he would not cry out, and we left him to what God had ordained.

Putting Abu Ashtar in the center of our cavalcade, I mounted my mare, and we galloped through the dust swept streets, out of the open gate. Only slaves and women saw us go.

TO FIND six hundred men in hiding somewhere upon a wide countryside in a starless and wind swept night is a task for hunting dogs or a real prophet. We only knew that Mahabat Khan had come down the shallow valley of the river and would be somewhere west of the Persian *lashgar*.

We turned toward the river and heard it rushing past, making a deep roar. Up in the hills the storm had filled the water-courses, and the river raged. We had great trouble making our way down it, plunging through tilled land and skirting tossing willow groves. Dogs howled at us in a chorus that echoed the voice of the wind. We saw no lights, although we passed dark hamlets several times.

We trotted over the highroad upon

which I had come to Kandahar. Then the gardens became less and the open brush more plentiful. Our horses were restless, and we had to rein them in in order to listen; this availed us little, for the brush crackling under the wind and the mutter of the river filled our ears.

"On such a night," cried a young Bedouin, "we could steal into the Persian horse lines, unheard."

"On such a night," I responded, remembering other experiences in other years, "we could wander into a Persian guard post, unknowing."

By now it seemed to me that the *lashgar* must lie upon our left. But it was useless to try to feel our way toward it and hope to meet the body of Pathans before running into the camp. Whether we encountered friends or foes, we would probably be greeted with arrows.

I decided to follow the river, thinking that in this accursed blackness we would at least be keeping in one direction, and that some stragglers would surely have fallen behind Mahabat Khan's force.

Then the rain came down, driving suddenly upon the backs of our heads and shoulders.

We shivered and went on in silence. In the end it was not our searching that came upon the Pathans. My mare whinnied, and another horse answered, a spear's length away.

I bent low in the saddle and called out, saying that we were friends, seeking the Sirdar. Something stirred in the blackness and a voice answered—

"By God, so are we!"

Three or four Yuzufis had become lost and were wandering around, as witless as ourselves by the river. They told us that Mahabat Khan had passed an hour ago, turning east before the rain began. At least we knew that he was not by the river, and I ordered my men and the Yuzufis to spread out, keeping within call of each other, and to push on swiftly.

So we went ahead after a fashion, yelling and stumbling and trotting heavily in the mud. As to our line, it soon became a thing of madness, for I heard Bedouins

crashing through brush behind me, and once I ran into a Pathan who was going across my path. Only Abu Ashtar kept his temper, saying that all things had an end.

This, indeed, had a sudden end. A heavy voice cried out within touch of my rein hand—

"In the name of Allah the compassionate, the merciful—are ye women, nightmare ridden, or dogs become mad?"

The voice was Artaban's. The Yuzufi chieftain had heard our clamor over the beat of the rain and had hastened back to silence us. We had come upon the right wing of Mahabat Khan's force. A little more to the right, and we would have pushed in to the *lashgar* of Shah Abbas.

I told the one eyed chieftain that I must see Mahabat Khan at once. He was a man of deeds, and he took my rein in one hand and Abu Ashtar's in the other and strode off without another word.

It is a strange thing but true that all the other eleven Arabs heard us and gathered docilely behind me, like a disciplined escort, whereas a moment before they had been plunging about anywhere. Nay, the Yuzufis with us chose to slip away to their comrades, without revealing themselves, no doubt dreading their chieftain's tongue.

We splashed among groups of men squatting in the rain, and presently found horsemen about us, dismounted and standing by their beasts. Hillmen such as these do not love night marches or fighting in a storm, and it was a miracle that Mahabat Khan had brought them thus far and formed them after a fashion. He had taken command of the two hundred riders in the center.

By the time we found him the rain had ceased, although the wind still blew with force. The clouds raced overhead, yielding a little light—or rather, the utter darkness seemed less. Mahabat Khan was in the center of a group of Hazaras, telling them of a time when he had marched at night in Bengal during the rains and had missed half his command, at dawn, a hundred miles down the Ganges in boats. I took him apart, dismounting and stand-

ing in the mud, and he listened silently to what I had to tell—that Shah Abbas was before him in that *lashgar*.

He did not reprove me for leaving Baki without a guard. I had expected reproof and anger, and a hurried command to withdraw. But he kept his thoughts to himself and gave no command.

"It is too late to do otherwise," he said quietly. "I could not get word to Dost Muhammad."

After a moment he laughed a little.

"Eh, Daril, one thing is sure; Shah Abbas will be wet this dawn!"

The Pathans around us fell silent, and began to gather up their reins. Abu Ashtar lifted his head, and Mahabat Khan left me, springing toward his horse.

Somewhere ahead of us, over the whine of the wind, a roar of hoofs resounded, and a deep shouting. A smashing of brush, shrill neighing of horses—a growing clatter of steel, a bellow of a firelock. Dost Muhammad was in the Persian camp.

With a shout Mahabat Khan swung upon his saddle.

"*Hai!* Comewithme, yemen of the hills!"

And with a roar like the angry rush of the river, the tribesmen followed his voice.

I KNOW now, many years after that battle, that if Mahabat Khan had not led us forward instantly as he did, we would have been worsted at once. Sentries shot arrows at us, and drums rolled in the blackness. We had gone only a little way, when men began to run out in front of the horses.

Here and there lights flared up—torches in the hands of frightened slaves. They only made the darkness thicker elsewhere. We plunged in among the tents, knocking many of them flat, the Pathans halting to slash at the Persians who struggled under the wet cloth.

But Mahabat Khan led his riders on.

"Forward ye men of the hills!"

So we left many Persians behind us, to be dealt with by the Pathans afoot. Arrows sang past my ears, doing little harm to any one. It was no place for bows. Mahabat Khan had ordered his followers

to wield their swords, and those long *tulwars* did fearful work in the confusion. As to firelocks, I heard only that first shot. The rain and the swift onset made the clumsy muskets of no use at all.

The Arabs and I had followed the mass of Pathan riders who in turn followed the Sirdar. And presently we all saw lanterns and torches grouped in front of us. Here a hundred or more *kurshis*, mailed riders, were forming under officers, struggling into the saddles of rearing horses. Eh, few of them had had time to put on their armor.

Mahabat Khan tarried not at all. He spurred over the slippery clay at the Persians. A horseman swung out to meet him, and Mahabat Khan reined in, lifted his sword arm. His horse, checked in this fashion and made frantic by the flaring lights, slipped and slid, all four legs locked.

In this fashion they crashed into the foremost Persian, knocking his horse off balance, so that beast and rider went down beside the Sirdar, who leaned forward and slashed at a second soldier. The man tried to parry, cried out, and reeled with his head split open.

The sight inflamed the charging Pathans, who might have hung back and broken if they had not seen Mahabat Khan go through the Persian array like that.

"*Allah, il-'lah!*" they shouted from straining throats, and the clatter of steel and creaking saddles resounded around me.

After that all order was lost. My Bedouins scattered like dogs in a field of running hares, and many of the torches went down in the mud.

In truth I knew not what was happening. Men told me afterward that the main force of the Persians had rallied around the shah, to make stand against the Moguls who had not cut their way in as far as we.

I reined in under some trees and looked around. Artaban galloped past, waving a torch in one hand and a sword in the other, his dark face frenzied. He was alone.

I saw one of the Bedouins ride down and kill with his scimitar a fleeing Persian. Then he dismounted with a shout of triumph to rob the body, which was richly clad. It was folly to dismount at such a time. A bearded *kurshi* saw, and wheeled and galloped down upon the Bedouin, sticking him through the body with a lance.

I had drawn toward them, and the Persian saw me, dropped his lance and made at me with the sword. I gathered the mare under me and half turned, to take him on his left hand. He saw, rose in his stirrups and slashed down at me across his horse's head. I wished vainly then for a shield, knowing that such a stroke is hard to parry. At such a moment the mind races and the arm moves slowly.

The *kurshi* towered over me, blood dripping from a slash in his cheek, his teeth gleaming through his matted beard. He leaned forward and down as he struck. I thrust up my sword, catching his blade against my hand guard.

The force of the blow knocked the sword from his hand, and he drew back, reaching for a knife hilt. I slashed at his throat and felt the blade strike into flesh. He staggered, and urged his horse on, past me. Looking back, I saw him slip from the saddle.

"Daril!"

Mahabat Khan was calling me, and I made toward him, finding him escorted by no more than two Hazaras, one holding a torch gingerly—more than ready to drop it, if the Persians beset him. Mahabat Khan was breathing heavily, his fine tunic darkened with mud and blood. He bade me take the Hazaras and find the tent where Kushal had been held. Then he trotted off to seek Dost Muhammad.

As soon as the Sirdar had turned his back, the Hazara cast down the torch. I remembered that Kushal had been on the far side of the camp. When we galloped thither, we found little fighting going on. A light gleamed within the pavilion of blue silk.

The entrance was closed, and I dis-

mounted, bidding the tribesmen hold my horse. I lifted the hanging and stepped inside. No living thing was here, but upon the couch, outstretched in death, lay a woman.

I went to her side, looking down at the familiar yellow tresses, the slender throat and the blue-lidded eyes. It was Nisa.

Her lips curved a little, as if smiling, and her splendid head rested on one side against a cushion, as if she had settled herself to sleep. There was still a flush in her cheeks and warmth in her hand, when I touched it. She had been slain within the hour—slain by many stabs. Nay, the one who did it must have been angered indeed, thus to mutilate so fair a body.

The candle flames rose and sank as gusts of air came through the pavilion, and the changing light made Nisa's eyes and lips seem to move. I closed her eyelids and drew her shawl across her breast. At that moment I remembered only the time when she had pressed my hand against her heart.

I am an old man, and many times have I seen death, sudden and fearful, but for a girl to die thus alone and in the midst of maddened men was pitiful.

The entrance curtain was flung back, and I turned, sword in hand, seeing Kushal enter. His *pugri* was gone; his wet dark hair hung about his bloodshot eyes. He staggered like a man badly wounded or utterly weary.

"Ha, Daril!" he cried at me, and flung his sword down upon the carpet.

"Hast thou done this?" I asked, pointing at the couch.

"I?" He planted his back against the tentpole and laughed with bloodless lips. "I loved her. Knowest thou what she has done?"

The tumbling words seemed to give his spirit relief, and he talked on:

"Daril, we twain were here in the hour before this dawn. She had waited for the coming of Mahabat Khan, and I taunted her, saying that he would never come at her summons. I hoped he would not come. I knew she had betrayed me to these dogs of the shah. In the hour be-

fore dawn she despaired of the Sirdar, and talked with the guards of the tent. Then she summoned that fellow of thine, the camelman, Sher Jan."

He sighed, holding himself more erect.

"She bade me go with Sher Jan, before the first light, saying that it had all been a trick. I went at once, and Sher Jan guided me past the outer guards unseen. Then I met Dost Muhammad's cavalry and heard of the attack to be made upon the *lashgar*."

He looked wearily at the weapon he had thrown away.

"Daril, I begged a sword and a horse, and fought my way hither. There were Persian lords at the tent, and lights. They had come for me and had revenged themselves on her."

Upon this I meditated, understanding that Nisa, the singing girl, had made Kushal captive, to serve her lord the shah. Then, when the hour came for Kushal's torture she had freed him, and waited in his place.

Why had she not gone with him? Was her pride too great for this? Did she hope at the last to outwit the Persians? I knew not. The heart of such a singing girl, wayward and passionate and full of longing—who knows it?

Kushal had gone to the divan and thrown himself down, pressing his forehead against her feet, in the very place where she had sat a day and a night ago, fanning the flies from him. He would not let me look at his wounds; he bade me go and keep the entrance, and let no others in. Nay, he thought no more of the battle.

My two tribesmen said that now the fighting was all in one place, and this meant that the shah must be surrounded by the Pathans and Moguls. The mist had turned gray and was drifting through the trees, and somewhere the sun was rising. The wet pavilions and the dark boles of trees were clearly visible.

The sound of the fighting changed, and my Hazaras gathered up their reins. Horses galloped toward us. I mounted into my saddle. No sooner had I done so,

than riders swept out of the trees and past the blue pavilion. Others followed in a dense mass, rushing like fiends out of the veil of mist. They were Persian cavalry, with nobles riding haphazard among troopers and mounted slaves.

In the midst of the throng rode a man of short stature and wide shoulders clad in cloth-of-gold. He was in the saddle of a tall black horse with gilded reins. I caught a glimpse of his broad face, dark with anger, as he lashed on his charger.

It was thus that I saw Abbas the Great flee from Kandahar, and he went as if Satan followed behind him.

But it was Mahabat Khan, who pursued the Persians, bareheaded, with Dost Muhammad at his side, and two hundred Moguls at his heels. They crashed through the camp and vanished into the mist. I stayed at the blue pavilion, where Nisa's candles burned fainter, and Kushal mourned.

AFTER victory, after the last blow is struck, and men begin to feel the ache of wounds, the spirit flags and the body is heavy. Then a man can not sleep and desires not food.

I watched the Pathans exulting as they looted the tents, dragging out carpets, piling up weapons and leading off the horses they had taken. My Bedouins rode by, clad after their custom, in the gilded mail and the silk turbans of the shah's men. They carried new shields and had gleaned the best of the horses, and were singing about it all. I smiled when blind old Abu Ashtar rode past, singing with the rest, his arms full of plunder. By God's mercy he had suffered no harm in all that fighting.

But later in the day I came upon the body of Artaban. In spite of his charm, or perhaps because he trusted too much in his charm, he had been slain by a lance that passed clear through his throat. Too often had he boasted that steel could not pierce him.

Shah Abbas escaped by the speed of his horse, taking refuge across the border, where other Persians awaited him. I did

not see this pursuit of an emperor, because I remembered Baki and galloped back to Kandahar to take charge of him again. Thus I was the first to enter the gates and shout the tidings of the battle.

I hastened to the tower chamber, and found it empty. The cords with which we had bound Baki lay upon the stone floor beside the cloth that had served for a gag. The rug and the cushions were torn from the divan, revealing a wooden chest as empty as the room. Baki had been able to free himself from his bonds and to flee from the citadel, taking with him a great weight of gold.

Nay, I knew before the end of that day that he had taken the gold.

He had placed it in sacks upon a horse and had gone through the gate unseen. He had turned his horse toward the river. It was Mahabat Khan who summoned me and took me to Baki.

The Veiled One lay curled up like a bird that had dropped from the sky. He lay in the mud by the river, crushed and beaten down by weapons and the hoofs of horses. Only by his tattered garment and the shreds of his veil did we know him. And all around him Pathans searched eagerly, picking out of the mud the gold coins that had fallen from the burst sacks.

"Eh, Daril," said Mahabat Khan, leaning on his saddle horn, "that is Persian gold. The *atabegs* of the shah, who are my prisoners, have told me the tale. Baki offered to open one of the gates of Kandahar to the shah if Abbas would come secretly with a strong body of men, as if to capture the city. Baki asked a price of ten thousand pieces of gold for Kandahar, and the shah agreed."

He looked away from the body, frowning.

"Five thousand pieces were sent to Baki by the hand of a singing girl, Nisa. I think he meant at first to take refuge in the hills, when the rest of the gold was his."

I thought of another thing—the coming of Mahabat Khan had disturbed both the Persians and Baki, and each had tried to be rid of the Sirdar, in different ways.

In the end Baki had become afraid

and had fled with his horse in the darkness along the river. He had been seeking the Persians, and thus, in the first light he had appeared before the maddened shah and a hundred riders. His death had been swift—what a death! Nay, Shah Abbas had believed himself betrayed, and in that dawn of fighting his mood must have been dark indeed.

Thus Baki disappeared, and no man saw him again. But to the Veiled One death brought honor of a strange kind. The Pathans recognized the body of their prophet, and mourned. My Arabs told

their tale of his last vision in the tower, and to all of them it seemed that the Veiled One was indeed a holy man.

Who was to say otherwise? Not Dost Muhammad or Mahabat Khan, who took me with them in fellowship to Ind. Not I, who was glad to behold Baki at last safely in his grave. Many hillmen stopped to pray and to tie rags to his shrine, and the sick journeyed far to this holy spot.

But I, when I passed through those hills again, thought of what is written—that a man can not save himself by his gold, if his deeds destroy him.

Renegade

By GEORGES SURDEZ

IN THE colorful gathering of American, French, English, Scotch and Hessian troops at the surrender of Yorktown one unit was conspicuous. It was composed of tall, rangy men whose rough faces were surmounted by fur caps, trimmed with black and red feathers. These men were armed with very long rifles, which they were known to use with extreme skill.

They were called Riflemen, and had been recruited among the hunters, trappers and *coureurs* of the Indian frontier. They were Americans commanded by a Frenchman, young Marie-Joseph Motier, better known as Marquis de Lafayette.

Chevalier de Villebresme, an officer of the French regiment "Spotless Auvergne," present at the ceremony, found the contrast between the well dressed, splendidly equipped soldiers of the defeated army and these primitive fighters from the forest most startling.

In fact, de Villebresme and the other officers of noble birth were surprised to see Lafayette, a gentleman accustomed to the delicate usages of the court of

France, aping the ideas and customs of the Americans. The Marquis had become, they thought, more American than French.

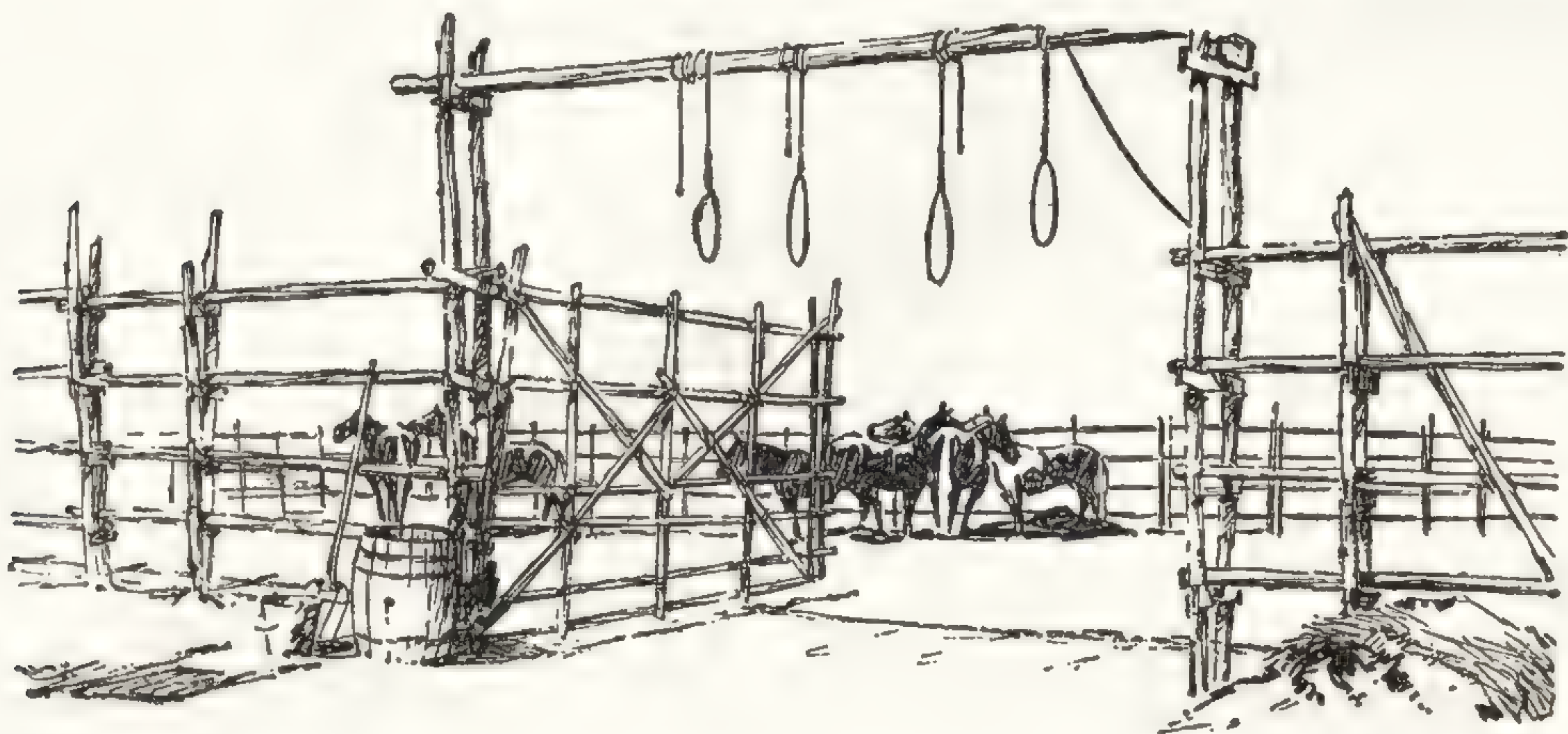
Lafayette loved his men. From his trip to France he had brought back various ornaments for the common soldiers, swords for the officers, and flags. He had great trust in their fighting ability. During an attack on Yorktown, the Spotless Auvergne regiment, commanded by de Viomesnil, encountered difficulties. Lafayette's Riflemen had attained their objective. The young leader sent offer of help. On the next day de Viomesnil chided him for this implied scorn of his countrymen.

According to de Villebresme, the nobleman who had seen Lafayette among the Americans at Yorktown were not at all surprised when the Marquis sided with the populace when the French Revolution came. He had long been a renegade in their eyes, ready to betray his caste and his king. The seeds of "evil" had been in him ever since his contact with the "democrats" of the woods.

Raymond S. Spears

tells of a stranger from down East and

THE HORSE THIEF RENDEZVOUS



ABOUT sixteen miles west of Buckshot the Oregon Road dipped into a dry wash. Up this gully was a waterhole which overflowed in time of rains but never went empty, even in the long dry spells prevailing thereabouts most of the year, because it was fed by a small boiling spring. A trapper by the name of Bender had discovered the good water and had built a stone cabin and a lodge pole fence corral there, establishing a ranch. Then he was killed while trading his fur catch at Ft. Benton, his squaw wife went elsewhere, and the place became neglected, its history summarized in its name, Bender's Drink.

A wild, desolate loneliness stung those who at rare intervals came to a stop for the night there. One time two men were found frozen to death just over the ridge from the cabin. Then a lunatic made the cabin his den, prowling around in shaggy, howling, feral madness, like a bear or like a cougar, rarely resembling

a man in his varying moods—now and again shot at by a frightened homeseeker. Then a renegade killed him and an air of evil ghastliness was left about the scene.

Presently a Down Easter arrived, a shuffling, shambling, ne'er-do-well who came West expecting to find opportunities to seize wealth without knowing a main chance when he saw one. He was tickled to find a house ready built, so he squatted at Bender's Drink. He was really doing well, till a band of wandering Blackfeet mistook his slouchy gait for cowardice. He whipped a dozen, killing nine, but died of his wounds. The others, having captured his wife and daughter, carried them away, but a prospector saw them and rode into Buckshot giving the alarm.* A posse was organized and overtook the warriors ninety miles away, by another waterhole, where they were making merry, unaware of the vengeance crowding them. None survived. The mother was killed by a tomahawk and the

daughter just drifted on, her family name forgotten. She was Tillie; that's all.

Then Buckshot robbers needed a rendezvous. Hank Yacupe, sometimes known as "Dutch," took over Bender's Drink, and thus accepted the responsibility of the horses and mules which the Nighthawks brought to him. The trails into Buckshot, and the wagon roads southward, westward and eastward carried a great variety of traffic. Home-seekers went through in wagons. Adventurers came by on foot or on horseback. Stage coaches made their way roaring by, the Concord stages proving the workmanship by their endurance on the roughest roads traversed at top speed.

Lone horsemen went by, watchful, heavily armed, unknown. Small bands of men camped on their way along, some riding light, some driving bands of extra mounts and loaded horses and mules. Strangers were the rule—men who came and went giving no name, spoken of as riding a black horse with a star on the forehead, or a bay, or a gray; described by a hole in the hat or a scar on the cheek, and perhaps afterward heard of as some great scoundrel or a hero of wars or a lost soul of civilization.

A handful of desperate scoundrels recognized one another. They shook hands, agreeing to stand together through forest fire and high water. They ranged and roamed, catching lonely men unawares, or inveigling themselves into the companionship of small parties whose horseflesh was especially good, or whose pack animals promised valuable loot.

Strangers disappeared toward the horizon. Their affairs were no one's concern. Who cared if the man on Star Face arrived in Walla Walla or Salt Lake City? The horse, itself, turned up in Hank Yacupe's corral. How come? It did not matter. Nice horse, though. The same with a big bay horse, and some fine man mules from Missouri, able to carry a good pack over a rough road. Yacupe was doing a lively business in carrying-stock.

"You need a fast horse? Try Yacupe;

he's a trader," the word was passed in Buckshot.

Terry Deerbon arrived in Buckshot with footsore animals. He was a good fellow, drinking too much, spending money openly. He represented Eastern investors. The word was that good mines could be had cheap out from Buckshot, which money could develop and bring in ten thousand per cent. profit. Deerbon represented a lot of capital. He was hard on horses and, having foundered or sore-footed his mounts, he demanded more animals, in good condition.

"You'll find the best there is out at Hank Yacupe's," he was told by some one, and hiring a horse at the Buckshot livery he took his direction on the West Road toward faraway Oregon.

He did not return, but one day the liveryman found the horse behind his own corral, with the saddle on its back and the bridle tied to the horn.

"Must have left Deerbon out for a walk," Briesch said to his hostler, and the hostler laughed at the joke.

The Eastern capitalist had been left out so far he never came in.

SIX months later two men arrived in Buckshot—good men. They were Ream and Burvid, and they were looking for a mining engineer by the name of Terry Deerbon, about thirty-four years of age, nice, genial fellow, about so high and blue eyed, likely to take a drink and quite a talker, frank and open.

They went to Landers and Deck, general store proprietors and agents of the express company. Both remembered Deerbon very well. They had received letters inquiring about him, had written in reply all they could learn and still had one thousand five hundred dollars in gold which had been sent to his credit. Ream, Burvid, Deck and Landers talked the matter over in the store office.

"You'd know—you'd be able to identify any of Deerbon's property? His revolvers, belt, hat—anything like that?" Deck inquired.

"Oh, yes!" one of the two men

exclaimed. "That's why we came. We'd know his teeth, for that matter. And he broke his left leg when he was our man in a logging speculation in the White Mountains. We're back of him. If just a natural accident happened to him, same as may befall any man, all right. But if any meanness, any dirty deal has been given him, we're here to find out who is responsible. He performed his duties faithfully in our behalf. We paid him wages. But we owe him our assistance if he's in trouble, and if he's in his grave, we'll put a marker on it."

"All right, gentlemen," Deck said. "Of course, we know you. The general manager of the express company saw to that. You know us. Frankly, we have been hearing quite a little from a ranch known as Bender's Drink. Out west of town, about sixteen miles, you'll come to a dry wash. You go up that wash a mile, and around the second turn is a stone cabin, corral, two or three brush shacks and a log front, sod roof, a dugout in the side hill. A hard Dutchman, burly, flat faced and a broken talker, runs kind of a horse and mule market there, sells liquor—don't drink any of it—and keeps travelers. Don't sleep there; that is, both at the same time. Suppose you ride out. Your horses are travelworn and you can trade them in for the rest of your journey. Tell any one but us you're looking for Terry Deerbond?"

"Not a word. Saw you first."

"Good! We'll mind our own business. Look things over. Perhaps you can buy a revolver you've seen before. Or a hat. What size was his head?"

"Same as mine, exactly. I'll leave my hat here. No! I'll lose it where I can find it again. Much obliged, Deck! We'll find out. Then what?"

"Come back and tell us—if you're sure. One way or the other. Understand, you can't make any mistakes. It'll be serious."

"We understand perfectly," Ream said. "We'll spend the night here. Go around to see the sights. We'll mention we need

horses—good ones, reasonable say. That the way?"

"Fine. Red shirted fellows are plumb sure to suggest Yacupe's. Two are safer than one. But don't arouse suspicion—to make it look to be worth while—uh—to mob you."

"Certainly. We're very short of money—want good horses, cheap."

"Fine!"

"Hang Eye" Fritter of The Flower Bush said he understood Hank Yacupe had some good horses. This was confirmed from in front of the bar by "Ambling Pete" Covell, a red shirt and a bully, who told the inquirers how to find Yacupe's. In the morning, Covell joined them for the ride out to the ranch, just happening to be on his way in that direction and having in mind to buy some mules himself.

HANK YACUPE welcomed them. He had horses to sell, sure, but maybe not what such fine gentlemen would want; anyhow, they could look in the corral, after dinner, which wasn't so much, but was all ready.

A long table was set for fifteen around. Here sat men and women, two squaws, an Indian and a dandy, who ate with dainty gestures and of selected tidbits of birds, venison and cornbread.

"I say, Crease; huccome you killed that Yellow Vest Dorvis in Carson City?" some one inquired.

"A false, unjustified accusation of cheating, to tell the truth," the dandy replied judicially. "He insulted my honor."

"Knife?"

"Oh, no! Derringer," the dandy replied. "I almost never do use the flashing blade. A knife's messy, you know!"

"Yeh, drips all over, for a fact," one of the boys remarked, "but it comes off with a brush, for it dries fast in this country."

The visitors wondered if this wasn't talk to impress them. They made no comments. Certainly, the group was made up of hard customers, swaggering

but watchful. Ream sat across the table from Burvid, so that between them both could see in all directions. After eating, they went out to look over the corral of horses. Some of the animals were the finest they had seen. They traded, paying a remarkably small price to boot.

"I'd like a good revolver, if I could find one," Ream suggested to Burvid in Yacupe's hearing.

"I haf some goot ones, pistols and new-fangled shell guns," the rancher said.

Yacupe brought out forty or fifty pounds of short guns, revolvers, pistols, belts, holsters and sheath knives among them. Burvid reached and dragged a beautifully sewed belt with scabbard and revolver, a relatively new single action heavy model, cartridge cylinder weapon.

"This one," Ream said. "How much?"

"Vell, forty dollar."

Without a word Burvid paid the price. They two mounted their new horses and rode away at once. They came back to Buckshot, hitched their mounts in front of the Deck and Landers store and found the proprietors alone and unpacking a wagonload of cases.

"Well?" Deck inquired.

"Here is the revolver we gave Deerbon for luck!" Burvid choked.

"All right," Deck nodded grimly. "We'll do something about it."

Deck put on his hat and left the store, sauntering around, here and there to drink with certain quiet, self-contained men.

THAT night, two miles south of town, fourteen men met by a big rock, conspicuously white in the starlight.

"All here, all set!" some one remarked, and they rode westward.

At dawn they arrived at Bender's Drink. They swarmed into the main and outlying cabins.

"Yacupe!" Deck inquired, "where did you get this revolver and belt?"

"*Mein Gott! • Mein Gott!*" Yacupe wailed. "A committee!"

Of the nine men who were captured, five were allowed to go, as only half bad, or strangers. The women were herded

in a corner of the room as the grim posse barked their questions. One of the four broke down. The killing had been with a blow on the head. The body was dragged up the ravine and hidden under a bank.

"All right, boys!" some one said. "It's a hanging!"

"My idee 'zactly!" another assented.

"Aye!" the others voted.

Without ceremony, two who fought were subdued with violence; Yacupe, whose legs refused to function, was dragged and the fourth man walked with head up, swaggering, his gray eyes taking a last look around that vast, bare, bleak land.

The corral gate had two uprights with a long arch pole over their forked tops, Yacupe having made the improvement with methodical skill. Four ropes were lashed over the beam, and nooses swung eight feet from the ground. Two wagons were backed up under the nooses; the four men lifted to the rear ends and the two who had been whimpering checked their sobs, taking a brace.

"Vell, boys, all right," Yacupe said. "I get vat's to be my end."

"This comes of bad company!" another young fellow said, choking. "Don't tell my mother what come to me! I drank and gambled."

"Oh, I don't want to die! I don't want to die!" the third sobbed.

"Go to hell," the fourth shouted, snarling his opinion of the committee. "Here goes nothing!"

The horses, at whose heads stood six men, were rearing to go. The men leaped aside. Long lashes fell upon the flanks of the four beasts, which sprang away. The defiant man who had struck the blow that killed Deerbon leaped in the air.

The committee stood around, smoking, chewing, taking a drink now and then.

Presently they mounted their horses to ride away. The women took the wagons and drove westward, and thereafter for a long time the chance passerby would see at the corral gate of Bender's Drink the stark, withering reminders that sometimes it wasn't healthy to kill a stranger from away back East.

A New Story by the man who gave us "*CHEVRONS*" and
"*THREE LIGHTS FROM A MATCH*"

DOWN IN A DUGOUT

By Leonard H. Nason

FOUR men wriggled their way along the ground, dragging themselves along with their elbows, digging with their toes at the hard, slippery soil, going down headfirst into pits and crawling out the other side with lowered heads. Snow was falling—a steady, silent down-pour of thick flakes. This snow, falling into the mud, made a thick paste, a paste that was not frozen hard, but yet was so congealed by the cold that it had the consistency of the frosting of a cake. The buttons of the men's overcoats rasped on this paste; their hands sank into it to the wrists; they skidded bodily in it, sliding down sidewise into shell-holes, where their utmost efforts could not prevent an arm or a leg from plunging into water that seemed to scald, it was so cold.

The four men progressed silently, giving vent to their feelings only by soft grunts from time to time. Behind them lay the American lines, out of sight in the snow, and before them, perhaps a hundred yards away, were the German trenches, also invisible. From time to time a

greenish light would sparkle on the falling flakes, a faint twinkling like that made by the trolley of an electric car running along snow laden wires. This light came from flares fired from the German or the American trenches. It was the custom to fire these flares every few minutes, regardless of whether the man who fired them could see anything or not. The sudden glare of the light would show hostile watchers that the sentinels were on the alert; and the periodical firing of the flare would help to keep the man that fired it awake. These flares aided the crawling men a great deal, for they gave just enough light for the leader to be able to look around and get his bearings.

The four men halted as one of the lights gleamed, and after it had faded out one of the four addressed the leader in a hoarse whisper.

"Hey, Dinger," said he, "you know where you're at? We been crawling around in this slush long enough to go clear to the jerry lines an' back fifty times."



"Shut up!" replied Dinger. "Sure I know where I'm at. We'll be in the trench in a coupla more jumps. I seen the wire when that last light was up."

He spoke, however, without conviction. There was the splash of some one falling into a shell-hole, then unrestrained cursing as the unfortunate man emerged. The four men broke their silence, and a little buzz of profanity and old army words came from them.

"Where the hell are we at? I tell you my sleeve is full o' mud, right to the hilt!"

"I ain't gonna snake around in this soup no more. I'm gonna go home. You guys can go to hell!"

"You birds swaller your nose!" said Dinger, turning about savagely. "You don't do nothin' all day but bunk police, an' when you have to do a little work at night, you let out a screech like you was havin' a boil whittled. Pipe down now!"

Scooosh—plop! plop! plop! Three lights blazed one after the other. They were close, and every man flattened himself to the ground. They could see the lights floating slowly along, held aloft by a sort of parachute, a thin streamer of smoke trailing behind.

"You leatherheads!" muttered Dinger. "They heard us!"

The four of them hugged the ground, straining their ears for the first rip of a machine-gun. But all was silent, the lights went out, and the snow sifted silently down. The leader idly watched the flakes falling on the sleeve of his overcoat, one upon the other, piling down swiftly and noiselessly. It was time to be moving again—*crack!* The sound of breaking wood, the swift rustle and click of sliding

earth, and a startled voice lifted in profane protest. Silence once more. No gun barked questioningly; no sentry challenged; no lights gleamed. A voice spoke softly from the darkness:

"Hey, fellars, here's the trench. I fell into it an' like to broke my neck."

The other three men, grunting satisfaction, turned and wallowed their way in the direction of the voice.

"I knew it was right around here," said Dinger. "I thought I seen the wire when that last light was up."

In the trench the four men stamped their feet and beat the blood back into their hands. There were rotting boards in the bottom, an inch or so under the surface of mud, and crumbling revetments creaked when the men leaned against the trench wall. The men made horrid gasping sounds. They were blowing upon their half frozen hands to warm them.

"**C**OME ON," whispered Dinger, "this ain't buyin' baby any shoes. Let's go!"

"You know where you're at now?" asked the others earnestly. "Don't go gettin' us lost again."

"Follow me an' you'll wear diamonds!" replied Dinger.

He began to feel his way cautiously along the trench wall. The others followed, their overcoats rustling against the woven stakes that held up the trench wall, and their hobnails sucking in the mud. It was dark in the trench, even when a light was in the air, but the men were safe here from any inquisitive machine-gun. A practised eye could see that this trench



was an old one and unoccupied. The occasional flares lighted the crest of the parapet, outlining rotting sandbags, their contents merged with the surrounding mud.

The posts that supported the revetments leaned crazily; the wire that tied them to the ground was rusted and broken. Old telephone lines looped along the trench wall, their broken ends dragging in the mud and tripping the men who felt their way cautiously along. In places, the woven branches, the revetments, that kept the wall of the trench from caving in, had broken away entirely, and the whole side of the trench had fallen. When this obstacle was encountered the five ducked rapidly across the obstruction, bending almost double.

A flare popped directly overhead and, though the men in the trench knew they could not be seen, they halted and held their breaths. Suddenly Dinger and the man behind him gave a slight start. Before them the trench stretched straight and true for a dozen feet, and at the end of the dozen feet was a door. That was all they could see—that door, framed in black and streaked with white where the snow had lodged in the crevices. The light went out.

"Come on," said Dinger. "There it is! Don't tell me I don't know my way around this trench!"

He led the way forward briskly and, arriving at the door, he bent down and removed some blocks of cement from before it. Then he cautiously pushed it open.

Within was blackness, a cold damp breath of wet, rotting wood and old smells of food, of tobacco and of unwashed men, a smell of habitation that persists long after the inhabitants have gone. Dinger entered the darkness and, feeling his way, began to descend a slippery stairway, the dirt and stones that had fallen from the roof crunching beneath his feet. The others followed him cautiously, jumping against the walls. The short flight of steps ended, and all came to a panting halt.

"Well, show a light," said some one.

"Every one in?" asked Dinger. "Put down the blanket now. I don't suppose any one had sense enough to shut the door after them. No one ever does. I never see a gang like this squad. I think they was all brought up on a raft. Stand by!"

A match crackled and a dim light flickered, throwing the shadows of the men in dancing silhouettes against a concrete wall. Dinger had lighted a candle, which he proceeded to affix to the top of his helmet with its own wax.

"Well, fellars," said he, looking about with pride, "what do you think of this?"

The men blew upon their hands and beat their breasts. They looked about them silently. They were in a concrete room that was like an old cellar; green mold had shoved its way through cracks in wall and ceiling and a filthy blanket covered the doorway. Old telephone wires, their insulation hanging, festooned the walls. There was a table against one wall and a heap of mysterious débris in the corner.

"Well," remarked one of the men slowly, "it's kind of a cold night for sight-seein'. I have to do enough o' crawling around in the cold mud, without doing it in my time off. I wouldn't crawl two feet to see enough ole boche dugouts to pave hell!"

"Dinger," said one of the others, "if you've drug us out here on this night that ain't fit for a polecat to be abroad in, just to show us a boche pill-box, you won't never get back to the trench alive."

"Keep your shirts on," said Dinger, "an' cluster round."

He stepped to the pile of débris in the corner and swept it away with his foot. Then he bent down and lifted what seemed to be a cover, disclosing a square black hole.

"Gimme that candle," said Dinger.

The candle was handed to him, and he held it so that the men clustered about the hole could see what it contained. It was full of long, straw colored objects, black with mildew.

"Behold," said Dinger.

"LOOKS like wine," said one of the men hopefully.

"Take one out an' look at it closer," replied Dinger.

The other took out one of those mysterious things and gingerly removed the straw. A rusty gold cap met his eye, a label all spotted and stained, and the faded words: Piper Heidsieck Champagne.

"Ah!" said all. And then, "Is it real, no kiddin?"

"How'd you come to get hold of it?" cried the others. "How'd you know it was out here?"

"Last night we was on patrol," said Dinger. "I don't know what for, but just patrollin'. Well, I was on the right and we weren't doin' anythin' right then, so I come down this dugout to see what was in it. I knew we was too far from the boche lines for any one to be here and, while I was kickin' over that pile o' junk thinkin' o' souvenirs an' stuff, I seen a cover with a ring in it, an' underneath was the champagne. Well, not wantin' to carry it then, and there bein' too much anyway, I left it an' brung you guys out tonight to help carry it home."

"It's funny they named it after a chewin' tobacco, ain't it?" remarked one, looking fondly at the bottle.

"It is, sure," agreed Dinger. "Well, let's each grab an armful an' stir our feet outa here."

Each man took three bottles, one for each pocket and one in his hand. They remembered that a good part of their return journey would have to be on all fours and it would not do to be too loaded down.

"We'll have to leave some of it," decided Dinger. "We can come out tomorrow night an' get it. We got to get back before Schweitzer goes off post, or we'll get shot at. Come on now, beat it!"

"I'm kinda cold," remarked one of the men. "I think I'm gettin' a chill. I'm for carryin' some o' this stuff back inside o' me!"

"That's right!" chorused the others. "We need somethin' to warm us after that

crawl. Man, that mud congeals a man's heart!"

"Well," said Dinger, "we'll crack one bottle. That's enough. If we take too much we're liable to get lit. Who's got a corkscrew?"

There was a moment of silence. Corkscrews are not very common at the front.

"You don't open champagne with corkscrews," said a man finally. "You push the cork out with your thumbs. I seen it often when I used to be K.P. to the officers' mess."

There was a rasping sound, as the men took their cups from their canteen covers; and after some impatient language, the ex-K.P. to the officers' mess removed the cork with a very satisfying *plop*. The wine was portioned into the cups.

"Here's lookin' at you," said the men, and drank. They sighed deeply and drank again.

"Man, that's cold enough to crack your teeth," remarked one, "but it sure does kindle the insides to beat hell."

"It tastes twice as good after a month o' drinkin' that dishwater coffee," remarked Dinger. "I'd walk on my hands from here to hell and back for a bottle o' joy water like this, to say nothin' o' crawlin' a few yards in No Man's Land. Well, finish up. We gotta be draggin' outa here. There's Germans around here, an' a war on, an' we ain't got no weapons but our jackknives."

"Them Germans don't hurt no one," objected a man. "They ain't let a shot go at us for a week."

"Well, we got to be on our way, anyway. If the Germans don't shoot at us our own guys will, if we get back after Schweitzer's relieved. We don't want to break any o' these bottles."

The men finished the last of the wine and started up the stairs.

"By God, I've got to cover up that hole!" muttered Dinger. "They won't no one come in here, but still they might, an' if they did, the first thing they'd see would be them bottles. Go on, you fellows. I'll be right up. Follow the old trench back. It goes right in near where

we come out. I'll be along in a second."

The other three went up the stairs, and Dinger paused to blow on his fingers before he put the cover back on the hole. How many bottles were there in there? He took up the candle, put his helmet on his head, and inspected the hole. There were still a dozen or so left. He put the candle on the floor and bent down to pick up his three bottles. A draft of air made the candle flicker. Dinger heard the door at the top thud shut, and feet descending the stairs.

"Now what the hell did that guy come back for?" muttered Dinger, putting down his bottles.

THE BLANKET before the door was pulled back, and a man entered. The candlelight made him blink. Dinger, resting on one hand and knee, looked at the other, for a long moment. The newcomer was dressed in gray, with a single-breasted overcoat and muddy boots. The bottom of his face was covered by a sort of knitted hood, and his blinking eyes, a straggling moustache and his forehead were half hidden by the deep cowl of his helmet. It took some time for the two men to gather their wits, such was their mutual surprise, but Dinger had the advantage, for his eyes were accustomed to the light, and the other's were not.

Dinger's mind had but one thought—that the newcomer was a German and that the way to safety was through the door that the German barred. With a quick motion, Dinger knocked over and extinguished the candle, and he and the German met.

Things happened fast. Dinger had one object—to get the German away from the door and prevent his shouting for help, in case there were any of his friends around. With this in view, he grabbed for the German's mouth and stifled an incipient yell. The two reeled against the table and nearly fell. Dinger kept trying to get his heel behind the German's to trip him, but the German kept his feet clear.

Dinger clung to the man's right side,

pressing the German's right arm against his body, holding the German's left arm with his own left, and keeping his right hand over the German's mouth. Dinger could feel the other's teeth snapping at his palm, but the pressure of his thumb and fingers on the other's jaws made a hollow in his hand, and the searching teeth could get no hold.

Suddenly Dinger felt the German give a convulsive heave. Dinger's feet left the ground; his grip on the man's left arm was broken, and the two crashed to the floor, Dinger on the bottom. While they were still in air, Dinger knew that he had been tripped and thrown, and had made up his mind what to do.

The German thrust his hand between Dinger's face and his own body, seeking to break the hold over his mouth, but this left his right side unsupported. Dinger, heaving in turn, rolled the German off. The men's feet scratched madly on the cement floor. Dinger's mouth hold was broken; he grabbed frantically at the air, missed, and felt the German seize one of his wrists. Dinger could hear the other panting heavily and he decided that the German had more use of his breath for fighting than for shouting.

The grasp on his wrist was numbing. The German must be a trained wrestler. Dinger could tell by the way he grabbed. Dinger got in a good kick that drew a groan from his antagonist; but the next second they were rolling together on the floor. The German got the hold he was trying for, and Dinger felt the German's muscles tightening and his own becoming powerless. He tore one arm loose and clawed at the ground, but he felt himself rising in the air. There was something in his hand—a bottle. Dinger struck savagely with it toward where he thought the German's head must be.

Bop!

Dinger fell to the floor, but was up again instantly, feeling for the German and ready to strike. He could hear the man gasping, and a weakly waved hand brushed his face.

Crash!

There was silence after that. Dinger, the bottle ready for another blow, felt for the German. He found him, a soft heap, perfectly quiet. Dinger listened. Was that boche still scratching around, or had some one else come down the stairs? A voice spoke and though Dinger did not understand the words, he knew that the click and whine of them came from a German throat.

"This is goin' to be an expensive drink," thought Dinger.

He held his breath, but the newcomer was crossing the floor, his boots scraping on the cement. A tiny click. A beam of light dazzled Dinger, who struck with the bottle at the dim form behind the glare. The bottle felt very light now, yet it met resistance with a sharp *zzzip!*

The light clattered to the floor and rolled against the wall, where it still burned; but, being turned toward the wall, it did not light up the room. It only made a round white circle of light on the cement. More men came down the stairs, clattering loudly, heedless of the noise they made. Dinger, hoping against hope that it was the Americans returning, backed into a corner. A pistol fired not two feet from his head made his ears ring.

Streak after streak of red flame spat into the dark. The light against the wall glowed yellow in the smoke; the stench of the burned powder bit at Dinger's nostrils. He crouched in his corner, considering himself dead. He marvelled at the smoke; but pistols, fired continuously and in a confined space, even with smokeless powder, kick up quite a smudge.

It occurred to Dinger that either he was drunk, or that more than one pistol was working. The noise was frightful; but the sudden silence that fell was more so. The shooting stopped. There was a little whistling sigh, a sound as if a man had settled himself for a comfortable sleep, and all was quiet. Smoke curled into the dim light of the electric torch.

Dinger waited fifteen or twenty seconds. For a man waiting for his enemies in an underground trap, this is a long time. At the last, when he heard no sound, he

drew aside the curtain and looked up the stairs. The cold wind in his face told him that the door at the top was open, though he could see nothing. Was that a footstep that he heard at the top of the stair? He hurriedly dropped the curtain, clutching his bottle.

"The light!" thought Dinger. "Maybe I can get me a pistol, too!"

He stumbled over a body, seized the electric torch, which still burned, and swept it about the floor.

"Man, where did this gang come from?" he muttered.

BY THE overturned table lay one German, the first one to enter, perhaps, for he bore no mark. Another, bleeding unpleasantly from a wound in the throat, was in the middle of the room. A third was propped against the farther wall, his face the color of coffee with too much milk; and a fourth lay in a heap at the foot of the stairs. Dinger looked at them with stupefaction, and then at his sole weapon, the bottle.

The bottle had been broken, undoubtedly with the second blow he struck, and the fragment that was left was long and pointed, with a razor edge. A champagne bottle is made of very hard thick glass, to prevent the gas of the wine from bursting the bottle, and such a bottle, its bottom broken off, makes a frightful weapon.

"That first guy I must have banged on the jaw or over the skull, and the second guy got a cut throat with the edge of the bottle," muttered Dinger. "But what happened to them other two?" The problem was not to be solved. "Well, one thing I know," continued Dinger to himself, "that champagne enough to float the Leviathan won't keep me in this here hell-hole another second!"

Something thumped against the blanket at the entrance, fell with a clatter to the bottom stair and then rolled into the room, past the body of the German, and brought up against the other body in the center of the floor. This thing was small and round and black.

"*Fizzzzzz!*" it said.

Dinger's eyes leaped from their sockets. That thing was a grenade, on the point of bursting. He made a wild grab for it, but having the light in one hand and the bottle in the other, his movements were hampered. A second attempt secured him the grenade, but with his finger ends only so, that the wild heave he gave it did not hurl it up the stairs—it would have struck the blanket and rebounded, anyway—but into the far corner, where it fell from sight with a loud clank. Dinger threw himself to the cement floor.

Blam!

The crash of that explosion seemed to rock the dugout. Smoke gushed into the room as from a volcano, but over and above the thought that though he was still alive he was probably minus all his arms and legs, was the realization that the grenade had landed in the hole in the corner where was the champagne, and that said champagne was now utterly expended.

The smoke gradually disappeared, and Dinger, wiggling his arms and legs, found that all was intact. He decided he had better extinguish the torch, and he shoved off the button. A beam of light still bored through the curling smoke, but it came from the stairway. Dinger's eye also discovered the mouth of a one pound gun that weaved from side to side, like a snake's head.

"Come on down," said some one. "The grenade finished 'em."

The smoke cleared a little more, and the one pound gun diminished to a revolver, held by a man whom Dinger recognized as a staff officer of his battalion. The officer's eye lighted on Dinger at the same instant.

"Well, where the hell did you come from?" cried the officer. "Look at this, will you? Here's Dole in the bottom of this jerry funk-hole!" Dole was Dinger's official name.

More men came down, their faces dimly seen through the smoke. Dinger recognized the chaplain, the battalion gas officer, the regimental adjutant and two

others whose duties he did not know, but whose faces he recognized. The officer who had first spoken was the adjutant, and knew Dinger very well.

"Well," said the officer, "what are you doing here?"

"I lost my way," said Dinger. "I was on my way to the P.C. an' I took the wrong turn. I heard some jerries talkin' an' ducked in here an' they come in after me."

"Look at the stiff's!" cried the gas officer.

The electric torch went here and there.

"One of them is still alive," decided the regimental adjutant. "This one had his throat cut, and these other two are all shot to bits. Did you do this, Dole?"

"Well," said Dinger, "I batted one of them with the bottle, and I cut another one with it after it broke, but them two I couldn't figure out. There was a lot of shootin' goin' on, and most like they druv the hell out of each other."

"There was another one," said the gas officer. "He got away as we came up. We could hear a noise down here, so we threw down the grenade."

"But where did the grenade go?" asked one of the others.

Dinger pointed silently to the hole in the corner.

"The hell you say!" cried the adjutant, regardless of the chaplain's presence.

He made a rush for the hole and uttered some more unrestrained language. Dinger could hear him poking about in the broken glass. "Well, gentlemen," said the adjutant in a sad voice, "I'm afraid I've brought you out here for nothing."

"Why, here's an old leaky, stinking dugout and some new stiff's," said one of the officers, a man with a tiny waxed mustache, "that's worth a five mile hike on a snowy night any time."

"I'm sorry," said the adjutant. "No kidding, there was a couple of dozen of champagne here, but Connors had to throw his grenade in the hole, and that finished it. You can get a good smell if you hook your nose over this way, but that's all."

"I can't smell anything," said one of the officers, "but powder stink. What do you mean, champagne? What's champagne doing away out here in No Man's Land? I suppose this is your idea of a rag."

"Now don't begin to get off any of your limejuicing slang!" said the adjutant. "I'm the goat, I'll admit, and I'll get you all drunk the next time we're in rest billets. Listen, the Old Man gets a report from the Air Service that a section of old communicating trench is being cleaned out and that the chances are that jerry is going to come along it and pay us a call. So that night out go the patrols to find out if it's so. Well, it isn't. The old trench wall had caved in, and that looked on a photo like new construction. Air reconnaissance is pretty good, but it has its faults."

"Well, the leader of one of those patrols was me. I volunteered to lead it for the fun of it. I found this hole and came down in it alone, alone mind you, and what did I find but the champagne. And since I had ten thirsty doughboys with me, I left it where it was and brought you gentlemen out to carry it back."

"WELL, since the spice of the evening is gone," said the officer with the little mustache, "let's find out how come these stiffs and doughboy here."

"Listen, my lad," said the chaplain, with a burr in his speech that betrayed his racial origin. "Did ye not come out here for that which was in the hole, and did not these poor Germans come down and try to take it away from you? Speak up, now, like a man."

"Well, sir," said Dinger, "I was on G company's patrol last night, and I come down here and found the stuff, too, and couldn't carry it away. So I come back tonight. The jerries come plunging down the stairs while I was gettin' out the bottles. I got hold of a bottle and crowned the first guy. Then the war was on."

"I suppose the boche were after it, too," remarked one of the officers.

"It's lucky we didn't meet them here," remarked the adjutant. "This boy Dole

is quite a lad to lay away four of them."

"Not so hard in the dark," said little mustache. "He took 'em by surprise, and the second two shot each other in the dark and confusion."

"One of them is coming to," said the chaplain. "What a pity we have no German now, to ask him what for he come in here, and does he know where there's any more of that stuff."

"Let's get out of here," said the adjutant. "Leave the jerry here. We'd have a hard time explaining where we got him. The party's over."

They all went up the stairs and sidled along the dark trench. It was near daybreak and bitter cold. The snow still fell, but with finer flakes now, driven before a smart wind that cut the face and drove the snow like needles. The officers climbed out of the trench and, crawling a little way, cautiously called out their password. A gate in the wire swung open and they crawled through.

"What's that?" whispered the adjutant suddenly. A far off sound of singing such as one hears in a weak radio receiver, was faintly audible.

"Show me the man," says Finnegan,
'that don't act like he oughter.'

'Show me the man,' says Finnegan, 'that
tried to kiss me daughter.'

'Show me the man,' says Finnegan, 'an'
I'll hit him an awful swipe.'

'Sure he'll have no use for his handkerchief,
for he'll have no nose to wipe.'

"I BET there's some of your champagne over there," said little mustache.

"Where's Dole?" cried the adjutant.

"He went away half an hour ago," said the chaplain. "That's him leadin' the singin'. A fine tenor voice he has. He'd make a dandy choir boy."

"I'll make a choir boy of him," said the adjutant furiously. "He'll crack rocks the rest of his life. Why didn't he tell me he got that champagne out of there!"

"You didn't ask him," said the chaplain. "'Tis all gone now, anyway."

The truth of this being apparent to all, the officers made no further remark, but continued their way with dry throats.

BEGINNING

a novel of the Pioneers of the Nebraska Frontier

CHAPTER I

THE MOVERS

FROM the beginning of things the setting sun has been the magnet to draw tides of people from their ancient seats in search of something better and different. Whether the lure was land hunger, or gold fever, or trade supremacy, or the promptings of religious belief, the mighty movements of people have been from east to west. Ruins of lost empires mark the courses of some ancient migrations from India to Babylon, Jerusalem, Egypt and Greece. Neither Nineveh nor Thebes, nor Athens, nor Corinth could satisfy this mania for following the sun. With the western sun beckoning them on with promises of a golden morrow the hosts of adventurers answered the call, and founded Carthage and Rome, and penetrated to what was to be called France, Germany and the British Isles.

The boundless ocean halted the general movement for a bit, but the urge could not be denied. Drifting sands and solitudes marked ancient sites of hospitality and warfare; and with their backs to the east the people pressed on till the Americas gave up their secrets. There was a pause of a century and a half along a narrow strip of the Atlantic coast; then the movement was continued over the mountains, ever reaching for the West, not to be deflected from the world old course by mighty rivers, roaring to the movers to take advantage of broad currents and travel to the southlands.

Early in the 'fifties this mania for pursuing the sun had carried people beyond the far settlements of Iowa and Missouri and had established a frontier in the eastern Nebraska country. This



THE SUN

By Hugh Pendexter

westward sweep to the mouth of the Platte and up and down the west banks of the Missouri River was merely the endless repetition of that human restlessness, which dates back to the cradling of the race.

The Astorians, on their overland journey to the Pacific Coast, halted at Bellevue to hunt and to visit several Indian tribes. Their return through what is now the mighty State of Nebraska gave them much to tell about the country. Immigration up the Platte to the Oregon country was firmly established in 1842. The migration to Great Salt Lake over the Mormon road in 1847 and the rush to the goldfields of California in 1849 made the Oregon road the greatest highway in the world.

Thousands and thousands passed over it, seeking homes, seeking sanctuary, seeking gold. The first wave of settlers on any frontier is rarely content to remain. The chronic movers and their vans pass on in search of something better.



CHASERS

*Author of "Pay Gravel" and
"The Fighting Years"*

Their permanent abiding place is always just over the next horizon. They blaze the trail and test the hardships. In each successive wave are some who tarry along the road and who believe that they have found the Land of Promise without continuing to the end of the rainbow.

Some of these empire builders, the Mormons, halted on the west bank of the Missouri. Some of the Oregon home-seekers settled there; their vision permitted them to foresee the great commonwealth to be developed from the grassy hills and plains and the rich river bottoms. Gold seekers, going or returning, found it good to make permanent homes there. Veterans of the Indian trade held the country to be most desirable. Veterans returning from the Mexican War found the territory as far east as they cared to travel. The result was a hardy, resolute, self-dependent type, whose descendants would be fitted in every way for carrying on the magnificent work of building a great State.

"LAND HUNGER, GOLD FEVER AND THE HUMAN TIDES"

Through this screen of respectability there sifted much human refuse, even as at Tyre and Sidon—as always will be the fact, so long as there remains a virgin country to be changed into farms and towns. Rascals fled to and through the Nebraska settlements, escaping eastern justice. Villains fled from the western mining camps to escape the vigilantes' noose. Bad men and beasts of prey, the ne'er-do-wells and the weak, passed through the screen. And so they always will. Where there are roads to honor, there are roads to shame.

ROSCOE STRONG, with his son and daughter, crossed the Missouri into Cass County in the late summer of 1856. He was used to work. He had cleared a timber farm in Maine, and might have remained there, believing he had accomplished enough. However, in his blood the sleeping lust to venture abroad and use his shrewd eyes and learn how the world was made up had sent him into the West.

His daughter Ruth and his son Samuel were responsive to the same pioneer strain, and eagerly watched the busy scene in and around Plattsmouth. Here was life, they told each other. Dozens of families were crossing the Missouri at the river towns, north and south of the Platte, every week—somewhat better than the placid eddy of life as they had known it up in Maine.

Roscoe Strong approved of the bustle and confusion, as wagons came in and departed. Bidding his son and daughter to remain with the wagon and see that no thief made free with the heavy load of supplies, he hastened into the town. He was anxious to secure good land before it was all taken up. By good land he meant a claim near the river, as the country west

of Cass County was supposed to be a part of the Great American Desert. He found Main Street of Plattsmouth busy with wagons securing supplies and with groups of men feverishly moving about. Fifty per cent. of the inhabitants were of that obnoxious breed known as speculators. On meeting Mickelwait the ferryman he halted him and said:

"You crossed me this morning. What about land?"

"Keep near the river. Some settlers are out at Four Mile Creek. Some at Eight Mile. Some a short distance up the valley of the Weeping Water. Everything staked out, I believe, along the Lancaster County road. Join the Claim Club, and then get your three hundred and twenty acres."

"But the Federal Government only allows a hundred and sixty," Strong reminded.

"Last year our Legislature raised it to three hundred and twenty. The club will stand behind you and won't let any one jump your holdings."

"I think I'd rather take what the Government allows," Strong slowly replied.

"Suit yourself, but the boys are sure the Government will make good all titles up to three hundred and twenty acres, so long as the Territory voted that way. If you don't go far back from the river you'll have to buy from a club member. But it's a good time to buy, as the Indians just now are on the rampage. Whitman family barely escaped from Salt Basin in Lancaster County. Help's been asked for here, and at Rock Bluff and other towns. Good luck, and keep near the river."

Along with the other movers—pouring across the Missouri into Omaha, Plattsmouth, Nebraska City, Otoe City and Brownville—Strong had taken it for granted there was no desirable land fifty miles away from the river. As he walked along the street, trying to decide just what he would do, a small group of armed men rode toward the west.

"Cut their damn heads off!" hoarsely shouted a man.

"Those few going to hunt Indians?" asked Strong.

"Oh, there's others riding into Lancaster County. They have been burning and killing. Mrs. Whitman, left alone with her children, barely escaped, and overtook her husband."

"He was away from home and didn't know the Indians were there?"

"He'd left home to come here. When the woman and her children got clear, they was burning the cabin and killing the stock. If you're looking for land, you keep near the river."

This conversation, coupled with the ferryman's advice, convinced Strong that he wanted nothing of the back country. As a matter of fact there was no Indian outrage to avenge. As was their custom when walking through settlements or visiting isolated claims, a small band of Indians had called at the Whitman place and asked for food. Had there been twenty houses they would have visited each and eaten at each, if food were given them. Those who knew their ways gave no heed to painted faces filling the windows, to bucks and squaws entering and squatting on the floor without pausing to rap.

Newcomers, however, were apt to be alarmed. When a woman found herself alone with red company, she would, unless she was a seasoned pioneer, hurriedly set forth what she had. The red strollers were willing that their presence should frighten a white squaw, if her fear resulted in gifts of food.

But the resolute woman had no trouble in clearing her shack of such unwelcome company. The departure of armed men told Strong that he might hear the crackling of firearms and the whoops of red riders among the houses of Plattsmouth. He was anxious to return to the wagon and his children.

He was suddenly accosted by a tall, thin man, whose long black coat and carefully trimmed black whiskers suggested a clergyman. This man seized and shook Strong's hand.

"You've just crossed, friend. Of

course, you want land. Yes, sir! You want land; but you're a stickler enough to want good land. Dixel's got it. He's got just the chunk of land you've made up your mind to buy. Ben Dixel's hard luck is your good fortune. Yes, sir! Ben's shrewd, but he's got more good land 'n he can swing. If he could hold for another year he'd make an everlasting fortune out of it. But the best of us is caught napping at times. And if Ben's caught in a pinch, that's his hard luck and your everlasting good fortune."

"It's neighborly of you to tell me this, but I've never met Mr. Dixel," said Strong.

The stranger laughed, as if hugely delighted, and clapped his hand on Strong's shoulder and cried:

"That's rich; but not so rich as Dixel's land. You see, friend, I'm Ben Dixel. I've bit off more 'n I can chew at a mouthful."

"You've been talking about your own land?" said Strong.

"Yes, sir! Just as sure as it's the richest, sweetest, soil in this territory. And if I wasn't caught in a pinch, I'd be that selfish as to laugh even if a man begged me to sell. Why, good heavens, friend! And I wouldn't tell this to every one, for fear they might think I was bragging about my good luck. The claim I have in mind will fetch sixty dollars an acre within one year. If I have to sell any more after this particular claim I'm talking about, it must be agreed that I shall have the privilege of buying it back for seventy dollars an acre any time within a year."

"That's too high priced land for me, sir."

Strong would have passed on, if Dixel hadn't detained him by gripping his arm. In a low, tense voice Dixel said:

"You need that land. You want that land. You're going to buy that land. And Ben Dixel is going to put the price down so low you can't afford not to buy it."

"You can give title? I thought to buy direct from the Government."

Dixel smiled in pity and gently assured:

"I can give the best title a man can receive. I belong to the Claim Club, which will guard your interests as a father protects his child."

"You're a speculator?" exclaimed Strong, his gaze becoming suspicious.

"If you want to call me that. I own land. I own more 'n I can carry. But go to Nebraska City, Omaha, any river town, and if you buy land near the river, you'll buy from a landowner, not from the Government. If you go out where land is worthless, you'll hunt mighty sharp not to find a squatter on it. You'll get from him a squatter's title, and that ain't worth a damn! And who wants to get back from the river? Land's no good, and the Indians will kill or drive all such settlers away."

"The ferryman was telling me about the Indians. I'd planned to take up land direct from the Government."

"Then you'll have to travel mighty far, and you'll spend all your time cooped up in a soddy, protecting your life from the savages. Now if you had ready cash—"

"I can buy land; but I'd rather deal with the Government. If it wasn't for my son and daughter—"

"Good Lord! You'd never take innocent children back from the river? No, no! Don't tell me that! Why, see here, friend. There's nothing but wolves and Indians and sand hills out there. See here, you shall talk with men here who know Ben Dixel. Then I'll get two horses and we'll ride out to the land, and you shall talk with your neighbors. If you can find even a quarter of a section unclaimed within fifty miles of the river, I'll be mighty glad for you, and mighty sorry I ever overlooked it. The horses and my time won't cost you a cent. Meet me here in an hour. That'll give you time to ask every one in town about the chance of finding any land open for entry. What do you say? My hard luck's your gain. I've bit off more 'n I can chew."

"I'll be here for an hour," slowly

agreed Strong, "but I'm not saying I'll buy of you."

"That's all right. If you ain't the lucky one, I can throw my hat and hit others. But whether you buy of me or some one else, you haven't any right to endanger the lives of your two dear ones."

With this parting advice he sped away.

STRONG was in a quandary. He was averse to buying land from a stranger, or from any man. He had expected to deal with the Government. He discovered that he needed advice, and he regretted that he knew no one in the Territory. He began to study the men who were passing up and down the street. It was a waste of time to approach a mover, just arrived in the country. He would not trust a speculator.

Finally he observed a man who, he believed, was an old settler. His tall figure was clad in honest jeans and a hickory shirt. He was partly bald. Sun and storms had tanned his pate to the color of leather. What especially gave him an air of trustworthiness was the patriarchal white beard.

He slowly approached Strong, taking his time and often pausing to turn his beaming gaze on some flutter of excitement. Obviously he stood apart from the feverish activity filling the town. He was an onlooker. He was entirely detached from mercenary motives.

Although a reticent, reserved man by environment and heredity, Strong suddenly discovered that he was drawn to this amiable looking stranger; and he made bold to approach and accost him. After giving his name, he told of his plans in moving into the Territory and confessed his unsettled frame of mind. The stranger listened, nodding his massive head slowly and never taking his blue eyes from Strong's worried face. Strong, usually so guarded in telling his business, became more voluble, and detailed his talk with Dixel. He concluded by frankly asking for advice.

The old man took his arm in a fatherly way and told him:

"Son, you've come to the fountain-head of information about this glorious country. My name is Freedom, and free I am. The boys call me Bird of Freedom, as there ain't nothing that can clip my wings. Now as to this Ben Dixel—he's a speculator. He's only concerned with feathering his own nest; but he probably can give you as good title as any one. He and others of his breed have overloaded in grabbing land at a cost of sixty cents an acre, planning to sell for ten dollars or more an acre. And it's true that that land some time will be worth sixty dollars an acre. Got to be!

"It's also true you can git nothing near the river, 'less you buy of him or some other like him. Speculators ain't out here to settle. Easterners! Came with the first rush and had ready money. Took up everything they could get their claws on, and will unload on the settlers and go back home—or to some other place where they can git their paws into the dish. If you want to go out into Lancaster County, there's good land on Salt Creek. I can sell you a piece of mine that can't be beat. I'd never part with it, if I wasn't batching. Been batching all my life. No kith or kin, except a rattlepate of a grandniece. Never found a woman who suited me. So I'm foot-loose, and git an ache in my feet if I stick too long in one place.

"Went way down to the Republican early this summer with the Brackets. Friends of mine. There's a country for you! Game thicker 'n spatter. It's off the Oregon road, and elk, deer, antelope and buffalo fill the country. Millions of 'em! I'd stayed there, if it wa'n't the hunting ground of the Injuns, and if there was a few banks there."

"Banks? Money banks?"

Freedom nodded and explained:

"We have eight banks here in this Territory, and more coming, I hope. Banks is what put gumption into a new country, plenty of money. See here, you're a likely looking man. If you've got a little money, if only enough to buy a counter and stool or two and some

blank books, I know three other good men who'll join us, and we'll start a bank after the next Legislature gives us the right. There's a fortune in it. Look at these." He produced a sheaf of beautifully printed notes put out by various wildcat banks.

Strong drew back a step and hurriedly replied:

"But I'm no banker. I've no money to put into a bank. I've only two thousand dollars."

"Two thousand dollars!" sharply barked Bird of Freedom. "Gadamighty! With two thousand dollars I can plaster this territory knee deep with banks. Just listen—this is the beauty of our law. We don't need to put in any money scarcely at all. We've got to have a counter and some stools, but we might pick them up second hand. We'd have to pay in advance for the printing of the notes—"

"But your capital?"

"We can give our personal notes. Still I think we ought to put up a little money. But we can worry along at first with mighty little, for as soon as the first batch of our notes arrives, we have capital enough."

"I'm no banker, yet I don't see how any one can make much money out here by running a bank," Strong skeptically insisted. "With eight banks, I'd say the people are over supplied as it is."

"No, sir! Banks are the backbone of this country. With plenty of money any new country can flourish from the start. Prices are high, because there's plenty of money in circulation. I'd say there's nearly a thousand dollars of new bank money in circulation for every man, woman and child in this territory."

"I can't see the profit!"

"I'm getting to it. Only two banks issue notes up as high as ten dollars. No bank puts out any that's higher 'n ten. Think of the thousands of notes that stray East and never are redeemed!"

"Why! Is that honest?" demanded Strong.

"Why ain't it? Can you chase a man

back to Vermont and take him by the neck and make him redeem currency put out by our bank? We're ready to redeem it; but if the holder won't fetch it in, we're helpless, and have to mark it up as so much profit. And no man back East can afford to spend much time redeeming a note as small as ten dollars. Besides, we'd start our bank some distance from the river. I own lots in Thermopylæ. That would be a most proper place. We'd call it 'The Territorial Land Bank of Thermopylæ.' Looks good on a note."

"I know nothing about banking and am not interested. But I don't see the point of having a bank isolated from the river towns, where business is done," said Strong.

Bird of Freedom smiled patiently and explained:

"A bank shouldn't be located so handy that owners of notes can step in and redeem whenever the whim takes them. For the good of the country the notes should be kept in circulation, not lying idle in a bank. Why, when I was up in Michigan in the 'thirties they had their banks hidden away in the woods and swamps where the devil himself couldn't find them!"

"I don't consider that sound banking," stoutly insisted Strong. "I'll take land and raise crops. That's something I understand."

"Good! Every man ain't cut out to be a banker. I just mentioned it, as you looked likely. Now about Ben Dixel. His land's nearer the river than mine. He'll give you good title. If you want a homestead of a hundred and sixty acres, don't pay him more 'n three hundred dollars."

"And be sure to join the Claim Club when you pay over the money. Office in the Old Barracks at the foot of this street. It's that two story log house. Built as a trading post for Sam Martin, the first man to git a Government permit to live in what's now Cass County. That was in 'fifty-three; Jim O'Neil helped build it. They fetched the logs over from an

Iowy house, on the ice in the spring of that year. In the fall, O'Neil built that smaller log house, little north of the first, for Martin. Now used for county offices."

"How far back can I go without getting poor land?"

"Plumb to the Rocky Mountains. This talk you must keep near the river to git good land is all bosh. This Territory is the richest chunk of land in the world. Break sod anywhere and raise crops. I'm an old man, but I'll live to see folks living down in the Republican Valley and even in the Scotts Bluff country. You're keeping within twenty miles of the river, just to be near supplies and not too close to Injuns, if they ever cut up rough. Now here comes your man. Don't go above three hundred. Don't fail to join the club. Club has to back you up, if you have any trouble."

"He's offered to drive me out to see it."

"The land will be all right, if it's where I think it is. By looking on the plat I can tell you more about its true inwardness than he can."

Strong felt impelled to ask:

"Would you mind sticking by me until the bargain's made? That is, if I decide to buy of him."

"Son, you can trust me till the great American eagle loses all his tailfeathers. Howdy, Mr. Dixel."

"How do you do, Freedom," genially replied Dixel, but with a veiled glance of suspicion.

"MR. FREEDOM," began Strong.

"Bird of Freedom, or just Bird, or just Freedom, to my friends," interrupted the old man. "Just where is this land you allow to sell my friend, Dixel?"

"I have several likely claims."

"He wants one out on the Lancaster County road. Let me see your plat. I know every inch of the ground."

Dixel smiled to hide a frown, and produced and opened his county realty map. A glance convinced Strong that the land was well taken up for some twenty miles back from the river. Dixel pointed out

his holdings amounting to three hundred and twenty acres in all.

"But the Government doesn't allow more 'n a hundred and sixty to a homestead," reminded Strong.

Dixel patiently explained—

"Our Legislature increased the limit by doubling the Federal total."

"That's right, son," added Freedom. "Legislature did that, as the Claim Club believes a man should have that much. That's regular, all right. Under my thumb here, most likely claim of them all. Just about twenty miles out. Good land. I'll vouch for it. Just a hundred and sixty acres."

"This one a bit southerly and nearer the river would be better, I think, Bird. Don't you?"

"He isn't out here to run a ferry or catch fish. He wants prime land, and the claim my thumb's on is the best of the lot."

"I think you're mistaken, Bird, but it's his. We will make the entry on the Claim Club's books at once."

"Price?" asked Strong.

"Five hundred, and dirt cheap. If I wa'n't hard pressed for ready money, I'd never sell it for that. It's easily worth eight dollars an acre just as it is, with never a plow mark on it. With a shanty up and few acres of sod broken, it'll climb to twelve dollars an acre. Climb? No! Jump!"

Freedom's elbow dug into Strong's side, and the New Englander handed back the map and announced—

"Your price is more than I care to pay."

Dixel argued and pleaded. Strong began to edge away. Dixel then said:

"See here, the land is worth nothing unless some one takes it up. I suppose I will get a better price for the rest, if you improve that section. If you'll agree to live on it and put in a crop next year, I'll call it four hundred. I'm taking a licking for one hundred dollars."

"Guess I'll look around a bit. I'll never pay more 'n three hundred for any hundred and sixty acres in the Territory."

Dixel glared suspiciously at Freedom, then exclaimed:

"Good Lord! You're talking less 'n two dollars an acre. Good heavens, man! If you buy at that price, you'll have to go to the sand hills, or among the cañons of the Niobrara. Please explain to him, Freedom, that there's no two dollar land within hundreds of miles of the river."

Freedom combed his venerable beard, as if indulging in deep thought. At last he slowly decided:

"I'd say that seeing as how you're hard pressed, and as how he has Eastern money, that three hundred will be fair for both of you. I can see a dozen men hovering 'round who'd be quick to sell at that figger; but I don't think their land is as good as this particular claim. Still, one of them probably will sell him, if you leave him for another five minutes. Again, he's willing to take my word for the goodness of the land and not put you to the bother of riding out there with him. And Mickelwait told me less 'n two hours ago that seventeen families will be crossed by him tomorrow."

"Three hundred dollars takes it; but it's robbery!" snapped Dixel. "Come along to the club and we'll make the transfer."

SAM AND Ruth Strong, waiting at the wagon for their father to return, stared in round-eyed curiosity at the various outfits, passing or halting near them. In ancient times young people participated in westward hegras and displayed the same keen interest in the bustle and confusion. Sam Strong's light colored hair stood up in rebellion, despite comb and brush and, with his arched brows, gave him the appearance of perpetually being surprised. His darker sister was more reserved, and expressed no wonderment as she watched the colorful scene. Her voice was quiet as she remarked—

"There go men with guns."

"After Indians!" excitedly informed Sam. "Next wagon's been telling me the Indians have been burning and killing

just west of here. Some different from Maine! By George, I wish I was riding with them!" He gazed enviously after the three horsemen, galloping to the west, their muzzle loading Hawkins rifles suggesting grim business.

The girl glanced uneasily at her brother, and reminded—

"We came out here to make a new home, not to fight Indians." Then she nodded toward a man and woman in a light wagon nearby, and hopefully remarked, "Maybe there isn't any trouble. They drove in from the west and they don't pay any attention to the armed men."

Sam studied the couple. It was obvious that the two were arguing some point rather heatedly. Their indifference to their surroundings, and the fact they came from the west, indicated that they were settlers. Ruth jumped down from the wagon seat and announced—

"I'm going to be neighborly and speak to them."

Her brother followed her. The man and woman ceased their argument and greeted the girl most cordially. Before she could reply, the man was saying:

"You're movers, just coming in. My name's Bracket—Florida Bracket. Betsy, who is it she reminds me of? Is it the Kilgore girl down in Pennsylvania, or the Suttin girl back in Ioway?"

Mrs. Bracket, rather faded, rather weatherworn, and yet retaining much appeal, because of her soft, beautiful brown eyes, sighed dismally. Ruth was taken aback by the abrupt change from smiling welcome to a most doleful cast of countenance. She was beginning to feel embarrassed, when Mrs. Bracket reached out and patted and fondled the girl's brown hand. Her tearful expression persisted, however.

"God pity you two poor children, if you're going to live out in this forsaken country— It ain't the Suttin girl; her teeth were bad."

"Now, mother! Now, mother!" remonstrated Bracket.

"Out here in this forsaken country,

filled with disappointments and dangers," firmly continued Mrs. Bracket.

"Are the Indians so near as that?" anxiously asked Ruth.

"Injuns? Land sakes, no! Injuns are all right, if you treat 'em as decent as you would a stray dog. All they do is to call at a house to beg food. That Whitman woman scared herself into a fit. No one's been hurt. I had in mind this naked, lonely country. I pity any one who's foolish enough to come to it."

"Now, mother!"

"I mean it, Florida, every word of it! You needn't try to hush me," she warmly replied. "When I think of what we give up in leaving Drakeville, Ioway, I could bawl my eyes out. What wouldn't I give to hear the pheasants drumming, as they drummed the first spring we was there! To see the sky and trees full of wild geese and pigeons? To hear the cock prairie chicken sounding his *oom-boom-boom-boo!*"

"Good gracious, mother! But we see and hear prairie chickens and pigeons out here, millions of 'em. We'll see the wild geese, with the old gander flying at the tip of the wedge."

"You keep quiet, Florida. I'm talking about dear Drakeville, with the robins coming back in March, followed by the bluebirds and the catbirds and the thrushes and the meader-lark. Then the flickers and woodpeckers and wrens would come. Just to speak of it makes me almost smell the plum blossoms along the edge of the woods. I can almost hear bobwhite calling down in the field. And the whippoorwills at night! I could almost cry this minute."

Mr. Bracket was now aroused. He irritably accused:

"Dad burn it, mother! But you talked just that same way when we moved to Ioway from Pennsylvania; and you talked that same way after we moved to Pennsylvania from a three months' stay in New Hampshire. Who was it that wanted to quit Drakeville and come here? Not me at the first. Who was it said the Missouri was the River Jordan? You honed to go way beyond the river—

and we went. And then you done nothing but complain about the wind."

"I like a wind; but I hate a wind that blows day and night, rain or shine, with never any let up. I never hankered for a wind that's always scouring the land into dust and bringing thunder and hailstorms, till a body don't know where the next breath of life's coming from."

Thinking to bring the conversation back to more amiable channels, Ruth inquired—

"You are now moving away from the Territory?"

"Oh, I don't know, child," sighed Mrs. Bracket. "We drove in to meet an old friend, Mr. Freedom. Of course, what we oughter done was to cross into Kansas, 'stead of coming here. *That's a wonderful country!*"

"Border ruffians, fightings and killings! Windstorms that'll blow your teeth out!" vehemently exclaimed Mr. Bracket. "If you're set on going back to Drakeville, I'll pack the wagon and we'll go."

"And have the neighbors say we are failures. No, Florida. We'll stick it out this season. Prob'ly poverty, or homesickness, or drouth, or grasshoppers, or blizzards, or prairie fires, or fleas, or Injuns will finish us. But we'll stick till you can sell your land in Thermopylæ." Turning to the Strongs, and amazing them by the radiant good humor suddenly lighting her thin face, she joyously explained:

"The Thermopylæ land will make us rich. We come in to meet Mr. Freedom. He sold it to us. He owns land there, too. And my man's a master schemer. Soon as we decide about the Thermopylæ land, he's going ahead with his contraption that'll take the curl out of buffalo grass, which lies flat and tightly curled, you know. Once he can take the curl out of it, so it'll stand up as grass oughter, it can be cut and cured like any hay. It's the most wonderful fodder in the world."

"Just a matter of fixing the right kind of a roller with tiny teeth to catch and straighten out the curls," modestly explained Mr. Bracket.

"Show 'em the map of the Thermopylæ property, Florida," his wife urged.

Mr. Bracket produced a roll of heavy paper from under the wagon seat and opened it for inspection. The Strongs stared at the plat of a bustling city. There was a most pretentious court house, strongly reminiscent of the capitol at Washington. There were several public gardens, with one majestic swan swimming in a small lake. Making for the wharfs along the noble waterfront were three sidewheelers. The streets were named after historical personages and modern politicians. Mr. Bracket placed a thumb on a square, already smudgy with fingerprints, and informed:

"That's our riverfront property. Our home is back here near this grove of hickory. My woman's fond of woods. I bought up the land on each side, so we won't be crowded."

"Thermopylæ!" muttered Sam. "I never heard of it—I mean, out here. Where is it?"

"A thriving, bustling community," replied Mr. Bracket, rolling the map. "I've never seen it. I've got the notion it's out in the Red Willow country. Freedom told me how to reach it, but I must have gotten my foot over a trace. We didn't find it. We looked for it last year. Guess we went too far west. It was on that trip that mother fussed about the wind and wanted the Legislature to do something to stop it from blowing."

"Well, Florida, not so bad as that. Don't make the young folks think I'm silly. But I do say something oughter be done when a wind blows all the time. Not that it don't keep the air clean and pure. One feels stuffy back here at the river. All I ask is that you sell your holdings in Thermopylæ. Then we'll go back to Drakeville to our old home. I can see the road now, with the prairie chickens lining the fence on each side. I never see a road like that one. It had a way of leading to the walnuts and hickories and maples and oaks and elms and the hackberries and birches and—"

"When we drove up here you was talk-

ing Western Kansas," broke in Mr. Bracket.

"I spoke of Kansas," she corrected. "I don't know but what we'd do best in Arkansas. [But this is dry hearing for the young folks. We live some twenty miles out, south of the Lancaster road. If you're ever out our way, you stop and come in." Then, bending forward to pat the girl's cheek, she softly whispered, "You're very pretty, my dear. You remind me of a girl who was foolish enough to believe everything told her, and married only to find out she must live in a wagon. When you marry, my dear, pick a man who's rooted to one spot. Stay there. Don't always be moving around."

MR. BRACKET sighed audibly, spoke sharply to his horses and drove the light wagon to the head of Main street. Ruth stared after them, until they were out of sight; then she laughed in keen delight and told her brother—

"She's a dear; but it must be terrible at times to be her husband."

"Gab, gab, and blaming him," growled Sam. "But as he owns all that property in Thermopylæ, he'll make a fortune and perhaps can live where she'll be suited."

"No, he'll always live in his wagon," shrewdly corrected his sister. "His wife will never be contented to live in Drakeville, or any other 'ville."

They strolled back to their wagon and found two newcomers had halted beside it. The older man was thin of face and appeared to be nervous. The younger man closely resembled him, but suggested recklessness of spirit rather than a nervous temperament. As the Strongs halted by their wagon, the young man brusquely announced:

"As we're neighbors for a bit, wagon neighbors, we should get acquainted. My name's George Hancey. This is my father, Hancey. We're homesteading."

The four shook hands gravely, and Hancey senior, chewing nervously but without anything in his mouth, explained:

"Just finished fighting off a dozen land

leeches. They was all possessed to sell me land. Told them straight and plain I'd buy only of the Government. Too much land out here to be buying at second hand. Where's your folks? Or are you going it alone?"

"Father's in town. We're keen to get a good section as soon as possible, and put up a house."

"Then he don't want to spend any time in Plattsmouth. Some shark of a speculator will bamboozle him. George and me will probably live in a soddy or a dugout this winter."

"It would be fine if we could settle near you folks," said young Hancey.

"We're for that," readily agreed Strong. "And why not? Land for the taking if we get back from the river a bit."

As they continued their talk, the young men found that they approved of each other. At the first Ruth thought young Hancey was conceited. As she listened to him and her brother comparing likes and dislikes, she concluded that he would not be one to display patience, if opposed. But his laugh was good to hear, and his dark eyes sparkled with a keen sense of humor. Hancey senior impressed her as being very human and very likable, despite his irascibility when on the theme of land speculators.

He talked with Ruth aside and related how he had been cheated by a speculator once, and how he had vowed never to have any truck with any of them again. He proved to be a simple, kindly man, with his notions on life somewhat soured from having his faith vitiated by his one experience with a speculator.

They were so interested in each other that none saw Mr. Strong, until he had joined them. After shaking hands with the Hanceys, Strong informed his children—

"We own one hundred and sixty acres of what's said to be prime land, some twenty miles out on the Lancaster road."

"Buy of a land shark?" quickly asked Mr. Hancey.

"He may be a shark, but I think my deal is lawtight. He admitted he's a speculator."

"Then he's cheated you! I'd quicker trust a rattlesnake than one of that breed!"

Strong smiled and explained:

"I don't think he has cheated me. I'm a member of the Claim Club, and the club has to look after its own. Paid my dues and put my name on the book when I closed the deal. When I get around I'll enter my land at the Omaha land office. I don't believe I'd bought of the fellow if I hadn't had a talk with a quaint character, whose advice, except on the matter of banking, seemed to be very sound. I'm convinced he is perfectly honest. You may know him, Hancey, an old-timer out here. Calls himself Bird of Freedom. His last name is Freedom. Eccentric, but makes you like him."

"Why, he must be the man who sold Mr. Bracket river lots and other land in Thermopylæ," cried Ruth. "The Brackets were here an hour ago, waiting to meet him. They're anxious to locate their property."

She proceeded to describe their meeting with the Brackets, and caused even Hancey senior to smile when she gave a picture of Mrs. Bracket and her love for wandering. Her father gave no heed to the humorous angle of her talk, but frowned and wrinkled his brows and slowly repeated:

"Thermopylæ—I don't recall it. And I've studied up on about every settlement in the Territory—at least, I thought I had."

Young Hancey laughed until the tears came. When he could speak he cried:

"That's better 'n the trick they played on you, Dad. They're now selling land in the old world. I wonder how much ancient Carthage lots are fetching."

His father smiled grimly, then became grave, and told Strong—

"Looks like the old man you trusted was in with the shark."

Strong produced his receipt for the purchase price, his receipt for his dues in the club and the description of the land he had bought.

"The old man has certain notions that

are childishly foolish, but when you touch on land he knows the subject."

Hancey studied the receipts suspiciously, but was forced to admit:

"They look all regular. The clubs won't vouch for a title that doesn't exist, and they do have to stand by their members. The secretary knew you was buying of this wolf?"

"Of Mr. Dixel, yes. The business was done in the club office. Oh, it's all right. No doubt as to that. You located yet?"

Hancey shook his head.

"I'll drive along with you, if you don't mind. I'm going to locate and make improvements and deal direct with the Government."

Strong warned him:

"Then you'll have to go much farther back from the river than where I'm to locate. I saw the plat. Everything is held by the speculators, unless you get way back."

Hancey's smoldering anger against the tribe flared up.

"Held on paper, maybe; but not by law. The United States law says a man can't hold more 'n a hundred and sixty acres. Those sharks load up with everything in sight. I'll give them a fight, but not a darned penny!"

Strong was worried, but not for himself. He slowly said:

"I don't want you to get into any trouble, friend. I brought up that same question about the Government limiting a settler to a hundred and sixty acres. But the Legislature last year raised the limit to twice that amount. I saw the printed proceedings of the session. The claim clubs are all going ahead on the three hundred and twenty basis and are confident the Federal law will be changed to make their holdings legal."

"If the clubs believe that, they'll find they're butting against a stone wall," Hancey wrathfully insisted. "No Territory legislature can change a United States law. I'm going to locate without going to the Rocky Mountains. If a land shark comes along and claims it, and is holding more 'n his hundred and sixty

acres, I'll tell him where he can go to. And I'd like to see him, or a dozen of them, put me off!"

"Put us off!" cried young Hancey, his eyes hungry for a fight. "We've got two guns. I'd like to have them try it! It would cost them more 'n the price of the land."

Young Strong thrilled at this defiant speech. He began dramatizing himself into heroic roles. Let any evil assail his father or sister, and he'd prove he could fight as well as a Hancey. He hoped the Hanceys would be close neighbors. George was a fellow of spirit.

Mr. Strong took Hancey senior aside and talked gravely with him for several minutes. Hancey was shaking his head stubbornly, when the two returned to the wagons. Strong announced that they would start at once for their new home and would camp one night by the road. He delighted his children by adding that the Hanceys would keep them company.

As the wagons pulled out from the jam of heavy vehicles and took to the road, Strong told his son:

"They're likable people. They'll make good neighbors. Hancey is a good man through and through, but he's been made bitter by being cheated in a land deal. I'm mortal afraid for him, if he takes up land that's already claimed. Perhaps I can talk him out of it during the trip."

"He may not have the price to pay for land," suggested Sam.

"That ain't the trouble. I sounded him when we talked aside. Offered to lend him enough to satisfy a speculator's claim. He has money. But he's been cheated; but he'd rather fight than pay one cent to a speculator. But I'm hoping for the best."

CHAPTER II

HOD FELEY

DURING the last hour of the journey, the two wagons met armed horsemen riding east. One of these heeded Strong's uplifted hand and paused long enough to explain:

"Injun scare false alarm. No one hurt. No danger."

It was afternoon when Strong found his claim. It was slightly undulating, well grassed, and bordered on the well traveled road. After locating the stakes, with Dixel's name written on them, it was dark. Camp was made a short distance back from the road. In the morning the Hanceys announced that they must be journeying on to find unclaimed land. The families were sorry to part, especially the young people; but land was to be broken and homes were to be built.

After the Hanceys drove down the road, Strong pointed to a slight rise, well back from Lancaster highway and announced:

"We'll build there. We'll get the provisions out and under canvas and put up the tent; then I must hunt for boards. Perhaps, Ruth, you'd better go with me. I'm leaving you the revolver, Sam, but you won't need it. Don't look for us till we get back. I shall try Plattsmouth, but may have to cross into Iowa."

The stores and household goods were unloaded on the slight eminence and covered with waterproof canvas. The small tent was quickly set up. Then the horses were hitched to the wagon again. Ruth would have preferred staying on the claim, but said nothing. Sam watched the wagon roll down the slope and disappear toward Plattsmouth. He was surprised to discover that he felt lonesome.

With the exception of the bluff land, extending back a half mile from the Platte and Missouri, Cass County was a rich, rolling prairie. Standing by his tent, Sam stared out over the undulating country and wondered what lay beyond the western horizon. He recalled what he had heard of the Rocky Mountains, and unconsciously began sowing in his mind a desire to visit that wonderland. It was some time before he worked out of his dreaming to give heed to his surroundings.

Several small groves of burr oak and hickory dotted the course of dry runs,

which in the rainy season became tributaries to the Weeping Water. The gold of many sunflowers rose and fell in the persistent breeze. The trees invited him, as his life had been spent in a timbered country. He had been keen for adventure, but now he was troubled to discover that he was depressed by isolation. He had never felt that way when wandering through the forests of the upper Kennebec; nor even when once he was lost on the west branch of the Penobscot.

The effect of this never ending open country impressed him in an unexpected manner. Somehow, he could not rid himself of the notion that he was alone on top of the world. He missed the mountains and rugged hills, the big forests and innumerable babbling streams. What running water he had seen since entering the Territory lacked the musical tinkle of eastern brooks. Dry watercourses also were new to him.

In a moment of weakness he was almost tempted to walk to the road and exchange salutations with the passing movers. Thrusting the desire from him, he belted the revolver in the waistband of his trousers and explored the nearest clump of oak. After inspecting the dry bed of the little run, he procured a spade and set about digging a well. It did not take long to dig a well deep enough for water to seep in. After bailing out the muddy water, he proceeded to the hickories and, by the time he returned to the oaks, he found a plentiful supply of clear water in the hole.

Returning to the tent, he built a fire and cooked his supper. By the time he had eaten, it was dark, with the stars shining. Somewhere in the north he heard a far off wailing sound, and wondered if it were wolves or the cry of a loon. From closer at hand came the lonesome lament of the whippoorwill; it made him think of Mrs. Bracket and her yearning for the Iowa settlement. He was ashamed to find that his isolation worried him. To escape from himself, he arranged his blankets and went to sleep.

THE MORNING was faultlessly clear, with the wind still blowing smartly and keeping the heads of sunflowers and tumbleweeds in a rare commotion. While he was eating his breakfast, a man came in from the road and asked for some flour. He was traveling until he could find land not controlled by speculators and was practically out of provisions. In his wagon he had his wife and four small children. The optimism of this traveler surprised Sam.

Sam gave him a liberal amount of flour, and warned him on the uncertainty of his finding more, once he had traveled another twenty miles. The man replied:

"Always have worried along. Allow we always will. Once I get out where the game is thick I'll borry a few shoots of powder and we'll live high."

This remark prompted Sam to give him some powder. Had he realized the extent of the needy's demands during the next few months, he would have measured the flour more carefully.

He spent the morning walking around the claim. He discovered that, except for the road frontage, he was hemmed in by speculators' claims. Getting a pail of water from his well, he returned to the tent and began to hope his father and sister would arrive that night. Discarding the revolver, he seated himself in the opening of the tent and commenced reading a copy of the *Missouri Republican*. He learned that Old Bullion Benton had given four columns of conclusive reasons for supporting his son-in-law Frémont, and had concluded by announcing his intention to vote for Buchanan.

He was mildly interested in an article savagely criticising the Nebraska bank legislation, which concluded with the solemn warning that heretofore every bank authorized by a Western Territorial legislature had failed. The United States had bought historic Fort Pierre from the American Fur Company.

On another page he learned that the heavy migration to Nebraska had resulted in the closing of the land offices in Iowa. Brownville, down in Nemaha

County, had advanced from nothing to four hundred people inside of two years. It had a hundred dwellings, two hotels and various shops. Jim Lane, characterized as the champion of "free love, free niggers and Frémont," was living at the Nebraska City Hotel with two hundred of his followers.

"What'n hell you doing here?" demanded a hoarse voice.

Sam started convulsively and, over the top of his paper, stared at the scowling intruder. The man wore his jean trousers tucked into dilapidated cowhide boots. From the top of the right boot protruded the handle of a Bowie knife. A blowzy beard covered the man's face, and the hair hung long and ragged from under a slouch hat. Sam's gaze lingered on two pounds and ten ounces of the lethal weapon, held in a home-made holster and sagging from a harness strap that served as belt. It was the first Colt Navy revolver that Sam had seen, and he respected it mightily. A shadow of a second man materialized into the mar himself as a disreputable looking specimen lounged into view.

"He's deaf!" said the second man. "He's deaf, or a plumb fool, Hod. He don't understand plain Kansas talk."

"Nebraska talk, Juffy," growled the first man; then to Sam, "You heard me ask what 'n hell you doing here?"

"I was reading," Sam replied in an unsteady voice.

"Reading? Got all the United States to read in and has to pick out this place!" exclaimed Juffy in great disgust.

"Who hauled all this truck here? Who put this tent up?" fiercely demanded the one called Hod.

"My father and I. Why, what's wrong?"

"What's wrong? By God, that's good!" exploded Hod, fingering the handle of his big revolver. "D'you hear that, Juffy? Comes sneaking on to my land and asks what's wrong."

"Ask him where's his pap, Hod."

"My father should be on his way here from Plattsmouth," volunteered Sam,

equally glad and sorry that his father was not present. He was greatly disturbed. His visitors were as rough men as he had ever seen. The land had been bought from a speculator, and Hancey had roundly denounced all such as unmitigated scoundrels. As he pondered on what he should say next, the first man bellowed:

"My name's Hod Feley! This is my land! What do you and your old man mean by trying to jump my claim? This has got to be settled on the spot!"

"If there's any misunderstanding—"

"Hear that, Juffy?" roared Feley. "Says if there's any misunderstanding!"

"He wouldn't talk that way if you was more sharp with him, Hod."

"My father went after some boards to build a house. He'll be back soon; I'm sure if there's any mistake—"

"You bet your boots there's a mistake! A danged big mistake, when a feller snoops on to my land and locates as big as Billy-be-damned! And cluttering it all up with all this stuff! You sure your old man will be back today?"

Strong felt his first anger, as this characterization of his father was repeated.

"My father is Roscoe Strong. Call him that when you speak of him. He'll be back almost any time. He bought this land of a man in Plattsmouth. If you can prove title, he'll do what's right."

"Bet your boots he'll do what's right, when he dickers with Hod Feley! You hear him yapping about his pap coming almost any time, Juffy? My time's too valuable to wait round here till he gits good and ready to come back. Call the wagon, Juffy. You 'n' Gorm throw this stuff into it, and we'll haul it off. That'll be lesson Number One."

Juffy ran a short distance down the slope, waved his hands and commenced bawling:

"Moving job, Gorm. Hustle up with the wagon!"

SAM STRONG remained seated in the flap of the tent, wildly wondering what he could do or say. There were

three of them, and the two at the tent had been tremendously angry. He doubted not their eagerness to proceed to any degree of violence. He did not move, until he heard a wagon coming up the slope. Feley stepped back to give orders to his two companions about loading everything into the wagon.

Strong leaned forward to see the wagon. With an oath, Feley placed a heavy boot against his chest and violently pushed him on to his back. As he went back, he instinctively flung out a hand; his fingers rested on the butt of the thirty-one caliber Colt pocket pistol.

Feley ordered his companions:

"Put all that bag stuff well forward. Don't bust any, as there's sugar in some."

Sam's stupor passed away from him as he clutched the revolver. If there was a trespass, it could be settled legally. He dared not attempt to rise, as Feley kept watch of him. He was too excited to speak, and his eyes were wide with fear. He must cock the revolver and lose no time in bringing it in line with Feley's chest.

His nervous fingers felt numb as he pulled back the hammer. The loud explosion surprised him as much as it did Feley. The heavy ball passing through the side of the tent whistled close to Juffy's head, just as that individual was picking up a bag of sugar. With a frantic yell Feley leaped several feet away from the opening. Now Sam believed he must die, but was determined to die fighting. He rolled on his side and swung the weapon before him.

To his amazement, Feley disappeared around the tent. There came excited oaths and the crack of a whip. Creeping on all fours into view of the stack of provisions, he beheld the wagon madly racing down the slope. Two men on foot were running as rapidly as the horses, and were jumping erratically from side to side as they ran. Not until then did Sam realize that he had routed the trio.

He came to his feet, and screamed in rage without knowing that he did so.

He fired three shots after the retreating men and wagon before he realized that he was trying to kill. Refraining from firing more shots, yet filled with a curiously pleasing physical warmth, he raced down the slope. The swaying wagon entered the road and turned toward the west. The two men were running frantically to catch up with it.

Sam halted at the road and told himself:

"I made them run! I made them quit! They're cheats and cowards!"

He walked with a strut as he went back to the tent. He halted and cocked the revolver, as two figures came running toward him from the oaks by the little well. They waved their hands and shouted. But they could not scare him. The fighting spirit was born in him. Generations of New England men and women were reminding him that property rights were sacred and must be protected. He started through the grass to meet them half-way, the revolver half raised. The man in the lead laughed shrilly and held up both hands.

Sam halted, and used his eyes intelligently. He felt weak and silly when he discovered that the newcomers were the Hanceys. Mr. Hancey walked slowly. His son advanced at a run, whooping and shouting.

"We were coming to help you when you ran those three skunks off! Good for you, Sam! Once I thought you was an old stick-in-the-mud. Now I know you can fight your bigness. When they started to load the wagon we feared they'd steal the goods, without your making a yip."

Mr. Hancey came up and shook hands cordially with Sam.

"That's the way to meet such scamps," he endorsed. "Give them an inch and they'll rob and kill you. Show fight and they'll turn tail and run. Such thieves ought to be hung!"

"But they said they were hauling our property off the land. They said the land is theirs."

"They'd hauled it off the land all right," cried young Hancey. "And then

sold it and hunted around for another settler to rob."

"George has the right of it," assured Hancey. "They came up to see how many were guarding the goods. Finding you alone, they decided they could scare you into keeping quiet, while they rode off with the plunder. One of the first things they asked was how many were with you?"

"They seemed anxious to know when my father would return. You don't think they'll come back and make trouble for him?"

The Hanceys smiled. The elder said:

"They've had enough. If one Strong can make them run, they have no heart to meet two Strong's."

Satisfied that the intruders would not return, Sam became curious about the Hanceys' unexpected appearance. He asked them:

"Where did you come from? Where is your wagon?"

"We found a lot in back here—not as good a location as this, but it will do," explained Mr. Hancey. "George and I didn't know but what we could board with you folks till we get around to putting a shelter up. Perhaps we could swap work in busting up this sod."

"That'll be mighty fine," warmly replied Sam. "Father and Ruth will be awfully pleased to have you for neighbors. We won't feel so lonely. Who'd you buy off?"

"Of the Government, once I get around to going to Omaha. We'll squat till we're done breaking, and build a shanty."

Sam was surprised and a bit worried. He remarked—

"I thought all the claims in back of us are posted."

"This lot wasn't, except for one post at one corner. No name on that. I'm taking it." Hancey's thin face grew hard.

"Of course. It's mighty fine. I mean, if no one bobs up to claim it," faltered Sam.

"Just let them try that game," cried young Hancey, with a reckless laugh. "If they bob up, they'll bob down mighty

sudden. Dad and I know how to handle that breed."

FOR SEVERAL days Sam killed time. The Hanceys stayed with him nights, and he would have been glad to have helped them with their breaking, if not for the fear of thieves while he would be away.

It was early evening when Strong and Ruth returned with a big load of cottonwood boards. The two were surprised to find the Hanceys there. While they were eating supper, Strong told how he had been compelled to cross to the Iowa side, and had expected to drive to Clark's mill near St. Mary's, but was fortunate enough to meet a load of boards, which he bought. Not until they had finished eating, and Ruth had retired to the tent, did Strong seek details from the Hanceys. After Hancey had explained the situation, Strong smoked in silence for a few minutes; then he abruptly remarked:

"Hancey, I'm afraid you're in for trouble. According to the map I saw in the Claim Club all this land is taken up. I was hunting for Government land, and examined it closely. If the map didn't lie, you'll find some one has a claim to your land. Why isn't it better to ride into Plattsmouth and see if you can't buy it for a few hundred dollars? If you'll do that I'll go with you."

"No, sir!" was the emphatic reply. "No land shark can scare me off from Government land. That Claim Club has no standing under the law. The United States has set the limit at a hundred and sixty acres. Club members are entering title to three hundred and twenty. If they can go against the law for a hundred and sixty extra acres, they can claim the whole Territory. If any one comes along and proves he has title to my claim, and owns inside what the Government allows, I'll settle, or move on. There won't be any fuss about it. But if his holdings run over a hundred and sixty acres, I don't budge."

"But the Legislature allows—" Sam began.

"I don't give a rap what it allows," sharply interrupted Hancey. "The Federal Government comes first, and it's set the limit. Tail can't wag the dog out here. When a man makes entry on more than the limit he's breaking the law."

"Well, well, friend, you must do as you think best and wisest," said Strong. "And we're wishing you well; but I advise you not to put up any shelter, until you know you can hold the land. Stay over here with us."

"We'll be glad to board here with you. We must pay our way."

With this arrangement, work on the two claims was begun in earnest. The two families were kept so busy that neither had time for idle speculation. If the Stronges believed a cloud was hanging over their neighbors, the latter gave no sign of insecurity.

The first task was to put up a house on the Strong claim. Used to all kinds of work, the four men soon completed a rough, substantial building, sixteen by twenty-four. A tiny room for Ruth was finished off at one end. The next task was to sink a well close to the house. Then began the work of ploughing the tough prairie sod.

The Stronges felt uneasy when they shifted to the Hanceys' claim and commenced breaking. They could not rid themselves of the feeling they were trespassers, and might at any minute be roughly ordered off by a stranger. But as the days passed and no one came to question the Hanceys' right to the land, this uneasiness was dulled.

After enough land had been broken to insure an early planting in the spring, there came days when the young men could enjoy a bit of leisure. Strong suggested that they drive the wagon to Weeping Water and buy some supplies. With that done, he saw no reason why they should not take two horses and ride about and get acquainted with the neighbors.

This need of more supplies was occasioned by the repeated demands of neighbors, who were in dire need, and by

the almost continual arrival of wayfarers seeking food and shelter. Those bound for the west and those returning found the long house on the rise a convenient stopping place for a meal or two and a night's lodging. Strong had the soul of the true pioneer and kept open house. He would accept no pay for blanket space on the floor, or for supper and breakfast. These unexpected inroads rapidly reduced what had been supposed to be a winter's stock of staple provisions. Weeping Water seemed a likely depot, as a traveler told them a grist mill had been built there.

The trip was almost barren of results, however. The settlement consisted of a few houses, and a mill under construction. Two bags of flour were obtained, along with the disquieting information that the river towns were short of supplies and dependent almost entirely on passing boats. It was even doubtful whether adequate purchases could be made in Plattsmouth. Strong quickly decided.

"It may be necessary to send the wagon into Iowa. If that's the case, no time is to be lost. Iowa has been combed pretty clean, and there'll be no crossing the river after the ice forms. I believe I'll start at once. Six slept here last night and had two meals each."

"Better turn your house into a hotel and charge for food and shelter," advised young Hancey.

Strong shook his head and explained:

"If I'd come out here to run a tavern that would be all right; but I came to grow crops. I can't take advantage of folks caught in a storm, or folks caught with empty bellies. We'll keep the latchstring out. As long as we have food, we'll share it. When we haven't any, we'll go hungry along with the others."

"You can't keep it up all the time," warned Hancey senior.

"This travel of the hungry and shelterless won't last long. As the country to the west settles up, the needy will have more places to call at. That'll distribute the burden, so none of us will feel it. We must help each other. Ruth, you can go,

or stay and keep house for Mr. Hancey. It would be best if Hancey would make the trip with us. The boys can do their visiting as planned."

"I'll stay and work my place," said Hancey. "The girl mustn't stay to cook for me. She'd be alone daytimes." So it was settled that Hancey should sleep in the house and guard it against thieves, while the young men were taking a holiday.

RIDING Hancey's horses, they set off toward the west on the morning the wagon started for Plattsmouth. The settlers were well separated, as if each had moved to the territory to be alone. The two passed several days in traveling and visiting. Their frequent side trips from the road, to learn who owned a smoke showing pale against the sky, kept them from making much progress to the west. On the afternoon of the fourth day they sighted a small shack well back from the road on their left. On riding up to it, Sam was delighted to find it was the home of the Brackets.

He introduced Hancey, and Mrs. Bracket made them heartily welcome. She asked about the "pretty sister" and without waiting for a reply continued through a long string of questions. Where had they located? How much land had they taken? Did they know the Indian scare was a false alarm? And wouldn't they have done better if they had gone farther west? She only subsided when Florida Bracket and Mr. Freedom came in.

In a lull between queries, Freedom turned to young Hancey and inquired—

"What did your father pay for his claim?"

"He hasn't been to the land office yet. Regular Government price when he gets around to paying."

"But you said it's back of the Strong claim, and all the land on both sides of the road and for some miles in back is held by speculators," cried Freedom, his bushy white brows drawing down.

"There was only one stake—no name

on it. "We've taken it," quietly replied Hancey.

"Well, for goodness' sake!" exclaimed the old man, "I'm known as Bird of Freedom, from my freeness in moving about and shooting off my mouth. But even I would never think of squatting on land that's entered in the name of a claim club member. When I helped Mr. Strong pick out his land I showed him by the map how every piece of land in that neighborhood was bespoke."

"Any one can claim all the land 'tween here and the Rockies," replied young Hancey. "We'll hold that land against a man who claims more 'n a hundred and sixty acres. Otherwise we'll buy, or move. The United States is back of us. Buy or move in one case; fight it out in t'other."

"My son, I'm afraid you and your pa are in for trouble," sighed Freedom. "I'd go back with you and have a talk with your pa, if I didn't have some mighty pressing business out here. My old friend and I are thinking of making a little trip to find a lost town."

"We don't know just where our Thermopylæ lots are that Bird sold us," Mrs. Bracket informed Sam Strong.

"But they'd naturally be in Thermopylæ, wouldn't they?" asked Sam.

"But we don't know just where Thermopylæ is," she added.

"And Mr. Freedom will show you the way to it," remarked Hancey, his lips quivering with a desire to smile.

"Gosh hang it! That's easier said than done, son!" peevishly cried Freedom, worrying his beard with his two hands. "I bought from a map, and sold according to the map. Now I can't just lay my hand on that town."

"We know it's on the bend of a big river and that three steamboats are about to tie up," reminded Mrs. Bracket.

"And as there's a court house, it must be a county seat," eagerly added Bracket.

"No, not necessarily the county seat," sighed Freedom. "Every town out here plans to be the county seat, when it's laid out, and on the plat of the lots a

capitol is slid in. But it must be where steamboats can tie up, so it must be on a river."

"It can't be on the Platte," decided Sam. "No steamboats there."

"Not so fast, young man," gravely chided Bird of Freedom. "Up in Washington County they tried to run a steamboat between Plattsmouth and Fontenelle by the way of the Elkhorn. If the *Mary Cole* hadn't been wrecked near the mouth of the Platte, everything would 'a' gone hummingly. Our town *may* be on the Platte, although just now I think it's farther west, or down in northern Kansas. But we'll find it, Florida; don't you fret. If we don't, I'll sell your lots along with mine and let other folks do the hunting. If your woman wasn't so keen to move there, I'd say sell and not look another inch."

"How can a town be lost out here and no one know where it is?" incredulously asked Sam.

"Young man, this is a mighty big chunk of land. A whole county can be lost, for all I know," coldly replied Freedom. "Up in Michigan there used to be cities with flourishing banks that no one ever found, although their currency was common as bushes. Of course, the trouble with Thermopylæ is that some greenhorn has gone to work and changed the name— Florida, I'm running down to St. Louis this fall or winter. I'll sell your Thermopylæ land down there. Maybe I could turn it off in Brownville."

Mrs. Bracket was quick to take alarm at the suggestion. She announced:

"We won't be hasty in selling. The land is somewhere, or there wouldn't 'a' been a map. Land can't run away. I was hoping we could shift before the snow comes and before the fires start. Last fall the air was full of blazing heads of sunflowers and tumbleweeds. If a fire ever jumped a fireguard we'd be burned to a crisp. I don't like to think we must go through that every spring and fall."

"Too much land broken up 'round here for fires to do much hurt," comforted Freedom.

"We'd better sell that Thermopylae land anyway, Bird. Betsy's honing to go back to Drakeville," said Bracket.

"Not honing to go back there, or anywhere east of the river," corrected Mrs. Bracket with a sigh. "All I ask for is a spot where we can be at rest and stop gadding. What I did say, and do say, was that we were happy down in Republican Valley. There was Injuns, of course, but we never had any trouble with them. And I never shall forget that spring! Your grandniece would 'a' loved it, Freedom. All the thousands of buffalo wallers filled with water and covered with wild ducks and geese. Never was such a sight since Noah let the birds out of the ark! And the crocuses peeping through the late snow. And the adder-tongues come up, and the violets was sprinkled through the June grass, and the wild roses was scattered everywhere, and—"

"Gadamighty, woman!" broke in her husband. "For two months you've been lambasting that country and the wind and everything!"

"It had certain outs about it, as most every place has; but it ain't shut in by woods, and it don't make you feel so cooped up as Drakeville does," she retorted. "If I could be sure the Cheyennes wouldn't make trouble for us, I'd say we'd better go down on the Smoky in Kansas. Almost anywhere but here and back of the river."

Sam Strong stared at her in bewilderment. He was remembering her bitter arraignment of the Western country and her eloquent longing for the Iowa home. He timidly suggested—

"Did you ever think of the Oregon country as a fine place, ma'am?"

"There! That's where I've hankered to go," she cried, her cheeks taking on a little flush and, with her beautiful brown eyes, making her almost girlish. "There's a land for you! But Florida for some strange reason is ag'in it."

"We was bound for the Oregon country, when we reached Drakeville, and you refused to go another mile," he bitterly

reminded. "You said Oregon was the end of the world."

"If I ever thought that, I've certainly learned more about the world since hypering around from pillar to post in this Nebraska country. In my heart I've always dreamed of Oregon, or California. They say fruits do well in California, and it's ahead of Oregon along of the gold. I could raise fruit and keep some hens, while you was digging gold."

Mr. Bracket replied with some spirit, and his wife's rejoinder was so tinged with warmth as to embarrass the visitors and impel them to announce that they must be on their way. Instantly the couple, ably seconded by Freedom, insisted that they must stay for one night, at the very least. The hospitality was so genuine that they could not refuse.

WHILE waiting for supper to be prepared, Strong and Hancey went outside, on Freedom's invitation. The old man combed his white beard with his fingers for a bit and then revealed what was on his mind. He bluntly told young Hancey—

"I don't like the notion of your pa squatting on that claim."

"Well, we're there. We've broken up quite a few acres, and will build a shack before snow falls."

"But you ought to have some sort of title," insisted the old man. "I'm broad-minded. It's along of my liberal views on land and banks and 'most everything that they call me Bird of Freedom. I'm quite a hand to go along about as I please. My grandniece, Nancy, used to scold me about it. Now she's used to it. That reminds me that Nancy ought to be coming up from St. Louis almost any time now. If you 'n' your pa want to jump a claim in the Injun country and want to run the risk of being killed, that's all right. Settlers up in Dodge County right now are being warned by the Pawnees that they can't cut any more timber on red lands, and must clear out or be slaughtered. Just how far the Pawnees will go, no one knows; but I believe they

mean business. Both sides seem to be in the right. The Government paid the Omahas for the land, but didn't pay the Pawnees, who owned half of it. I expect the settlers will win out in the end. But your pa's case is different. He's entered a white man's land."

"We'll move, or buy, without a word, if a man shows he has title to the land and doesn't hold title to any other. Otherwise we stick," firmly replied Hancey.

"Even at the risk of being put over the river?"

"If they put us over the river, we'll come back. No damn claim club or gang of speculators can run this Territory much longer."

"Well, young man, I've said all I can. Some folks complain about our banks and the half a million dollars in circulation. Being a Bird of Freedom, I say the more money we have, the better off we be. My motto is 'Keep it going, and all is well.' I'm mighty broad minded on almost everything. But I do draw the line at fighting with white men over a claim, unless I hold good title to it, when there's millions of empty acres farther west, to be had for the taking."

This talk did not seem to have made any impression on young Hancey, but it left Sam Strong much worried. During the evening meal and the two hours of gossip before retiring, his thoughts revolved around Mr. Hancey and his situation. In the morning he suggested—

"George, it's time we were starting back."

HANCEY preferred to prolong the holiday, but after breakfast he agreed to ride for home. Before they parted with their new friends, Mrs. Bracket privately informed them that her husband might take her to Utah and that if they didn't like it there, they would go on to Oregon. The last they saw of the eccentric trio was Freedom and Bracket bending over the plat of Thermopylae, while Mrs. Bracket stood in the doorway and stared into the golden west.

"Good folks, but chronic movers," com-

mented Strong, as they slowly rode to the road. "Wonder what Freedom's grandniece is like. Probably as flighty as he."

"The old man is almost a bit too free with his advice, but I like him," decided Hancey.

"His advice was mighty good, George. I wish you would follow it. Why wouldn't it be simpler to find out if there is an owner of that land, and buy it, and have done worrying?"

Young Hancey laughed recklessly and assured:

"Dad and me are the owners, and we ain't doing any worrying. Let the other fellow do that."

Sam dropped the subject; but each hour his uneasiness increased. His companion insisted upon making more calls; and their return was delayed nearly two days by these side excursions. It was dusk when they finally left the road and walked up the slope, leading their horses. The house was dark. Strong was greatly disturbed that Mr. Hancey did not appear to welcome them.

Young Hancey did not appear to be disturbed. He said:

"Go in and start a fire, and I'll ride over and get Dad. He's working late."

He mounted his horse and disappeared in the darkness. Sam picketed his mount and hurried to the house. As he came up to the door he saw a torn piece of white paper thrust under it. The door was unfastened; he pushed it open and made a light. Then he examined the paper. It read:

Some trouble over claim, George. Gone to Plattsmouth to clear it up. Don't fuss. Don't follow me.

—PA HANCEY.

HE STARTED a fire and put on a spider of bacon; he was slicing cold potatoes, left over from Mr. Hancey's last meal, when he heard the horse returning at a gallop. As he made for the door, wondering how George would receive the news, the latter shouted:

"Come out here! Dad isn't over there!"

With the note in his hand, Sam threw

open the door. George excitedly began:

"He wasn't there! Where would he go to? We had the horses. He wouldn't be visiting this late—"

"Get down and read this writing he left for you. He's off for Plattsmouth."

Instead of dismounting he crowded his horse close to the door and snatched the paper from Sam's hand. He read the two lines at a glance. Then he reined about toward the road.

"Get off that horse and come in here," commanded young Strong. "What do you think you're going to do?"

"I'm riding to Plattsmouth as fast as a tired horse can carry me!"

"You're not. Your father says for you to stick to the claim. Be sensible, George. Get down and come in."

Young Hancey kicked his heels into the horse's flanks and rode down the slope. He waved a hand in farewell, but he did not look back.

Sam remained in the doorway, until the sound of the galloping hoofs had died away. Then he closed the door and rescued the burning bacon. He found himself feeling very miserable. Had he followed his wish he would have galloped after his friend. He tried to work himself into a better state of mind. Mr. Hancey would buy up any prior claim and remain a neighbor. He persisted in trying to believe this, until he dulled the edge of his worry. The house was very lonely. It was the second time he had been left to guard the claim, and he felt his isolation the more because he had had George Hancey for a companion. Wayfarers, eating deep into the winter's supply of provisions, already had cost his father more than he could afford to lose. Nevertheless, Sam found himself listening for the welcome sound of a hail from some traveler seeking food and shelter. None came.

He found some old newspapers and read word for word, trying to distract his thoughts; and all he could think of was his hot headed friend, riding to the east. He gave up all hope of transient company, and was making ready for bed, when he

was startled by the sound of horses coming up the slope. Before he could open the door, his father's hearty voice was calling—

"Oh, Sam!"

He ran from the house and down the slope to meet the wagon. A slim girl sprang over the wheel, and Sam caught her in his arms and smacked her loudly. He was astounded to hear his sister's voice cry out from the wagon seat—

"You got the wrong one, Sam."

"Good land!" faltered Sam, trying to peer into the young woman's face.

"Meet Nancy Freedom, grandniece of Mr. Freedom," chuckled Strong.

"We've met," quietly assured the girl.

To cover his confusion, Sam explained:

"I met your uncle a few days ago. He's stopping with the Brackets, some dozen miles west of here."

"He's hunting for a lost town, maybe?"

"Thermopylae."

The girl laughed as if greatly amused. They were walking beside the wagon, and she explained:

"I was with him when he bought those lots, and when he sold some to the Brackets. That was in Brownville. Has he started a bank yet? He sent word for me to meet him here—meaning, somewhere in Nebraska Territory."

"Think of it, Sam! She started without having any idea just where she would find him," cried Ruth from the wagon.

"No one ever knows just where to find him," reminded Nancy. "He never knows himself where he'll be next day. I was prepared to learn up here that he was on his way to Oregon. A few years ago he sent word for me to join him in Minnesota and when I got there he was back in Missouri. He's a bad, irresponsible youngster."

They were now standing before the open door, and Sam stared at her with approval. She was brown faced from outdoor life. Her eyes were brown, and she was given much to smiling, as if finding life very amusing.

"You're not afraid of traveling alone?" Sam asked.

She was surprised at the query and answered—

"Why should I be?" She tapped a home-made holster, slung over her shoulder, and which held a six-shooter. "Not that I ever need this, but uncle gave it to me, and I tote it to please him—but your father's unloading."

"And you haven't kissed your sister," reminded Ruth.

THE GIRLS went into the house, and Mr. Strong told his son:

"Had to cross the river, Sam. No supplies in Plattsmouth. They said Nebraska City isn't any better off. I was lucky to meet a wagonload of stores a few miles back from the river, and bought them. Ioway's getting pretty well cleaned out of grub, unless you go far back. Folks may go hungry this winter, if provisions don't come. Hope the buffalo hunters have smoked lots of meat. Met Freedom's niece in Plattsmouth, and Ruth stayed with her, while I was across the river."

He lowered his voice and added:

"That girl's really remarkable. Goes everywhere and laughs most of the time. Looks on her uncle and the whole world as a joke. Still she loves him and loves the world. She insists Freedom never grew up and is still a wayward child."

"I'm so upset by your coming I've been forgetting something that's important," Sam said in a low voice. And he told about Mr. Hancey's note under the door and young Hancey's ride to find his father.

"By hemlock! That was the wild man I cussed for hogging the road. Tore by me like a crazy man. He'll spoil the horse. So Hancey's had trouble about that claim! Well, I warned him enough. Too bad. Comes of being set in your ways. I didn't fancy paying that three hundred to a speculator; but it was the quickest and cheapest way out of it."

"I'm all upset; I wanted to ride with him."

"You'd been foolish. Sorry George went. Hancey will pay the speculator, or move off. And I'd hate to lose him as

a neighbor. If he quits he's lost the time and work of breaking the land. His message don't say when he started for Plattsmouth."

"You don't think there'll be any serious trouble?"

"How can there be? If the speculator can show title on the Claim Club's books, Hancey must pay or quit."

"What if he refuses to quit?"

"Don't talk foolish."

"But suppose he insists on acting foolish," continued Sam. "George has as hot a temper as his father."

Mr. Strong sighed and announced:

"If he doesn't return in a few days, I'll go to Plattsmouth. The speculators are a nuisance and are hurting the country. But the settlers must put up with what they find. Speculators ain't having it all their own way. Some have had to unload at prices below the cost of entering, interest money and taxes. Dixel, the man I bought of, has cleared out. He was trying to carry so much land he lost 'most everything. His holdings cost him about fifty cents an acre. He planned to hold it till its value went up, because surrounding lands were improved, when he hoped to sell for as high as forty dollars an acre. A wicked gambler! But Hancey isn't a fool."

"Just the same, I wish you were with him," said Sam.

"If I'd been here, I'd made him settle on the spot. Or I'd bought the title and given it to him. If he doesn't come back in two days, I'll go to Plattsmouth."

The supplies were housed, and Ruth was informed of their neighbors' plight. The girl became very grave. All she said was—

"Of course, there will be no serious trouble?"

"Nothing worse than for him to lose his time and work on the claim," assured her father.

Nancy Freedom listened thoughtfully to the conversation, and remarked:

"They put a man over the river down Nebraska City way. I think your neighbor may need you, Mr. Strong."

This speech revived all of Sam's fears. His father also was disturbed.

"It's a shame," he said, "that I didn't know about it, when I crossed from the Iowa side to Plattsmouth; but it was early in the morning, and I was in such a mortal rush I missed my chance. He probably was in town even then. Did you hear anything, Miss Nancy?"

"Only some men on the street talking about some one being stubborn. Lend me a horse and I'll ride in tomorrow."

"Good land, I can do the riding! If he doesn't show up tomorrow, I'll start early next morning. The horses need that rest or they'll break down."

In the morning Strong suggested that Ruth show Nancy the claim, while he and Sam walked over to the Hancey claim. Their visit to the claim furnished them with no information. As they were returning, Sam remarked:

"Whoever called on him took him back to Plattsmouth. George and I had the horses."

"That's true. Not that it makes any difference; but we were stupid not to think of it. It may delay his getting back. The boy's with him now, but he won't ride on ahead of him. I'll start early in the morning."

As they sat down to dinner, Nancy Freedom remarked:

"You have a likely looking place here, Mr. Strong. You've broken up some stretch of sod. I'm going to stay with you till tomorrow, and then start hunting for my uncle."

"If it wasn't for leaving Ruth alone while I'm riding to Plattsmouth I'd have Sam go along with you and show you the place," replied Strong absent-mindedly.

With a look of surprise, quickly followed by a broad smile, she told him:

"If you want me to go somewhere to look after your boy, all right! But I don't need any help."

Sam grinned sheepishly, and was much irritated. He began to fear that the girl had a sharp tongue. She suddenly asked—

"What bank's failed in the Territory recently?"

"Haven't heard of any failing," said Strong.

She frowned; then smiled, and shook her head.

"Queer. Uncle sent me nearly a thousand in Nemaha Valley banknotes, with orders to pass it in St. Louis, even if I had to take a big discount. I did so, but I didn't have to go beyond St. Joe. That bank must be weak. He got rid of two thousand Michigan bank money after the bank had failed. 'Beat the news to St. Louis,' as he called it."

She was laughing in keen enjoyment of this coup when she noticed the perplexed expression on Sam's face. She stared at him a moment, and said:

"Yes, I passed the money. I never would pass any after a bank had failed; but my uncle is different. If it's legal to run a wildcat bank, it's legal for folks holding the pretty paper money to get rid of it when and where they can."

"I wasn't questioning your uncle's honesty, Miss Nancy," Sam awkwardly assured.

She essayed a frown, and concluded by throwing back her head and displaying perfect teeth while she laughed. Then she soberly advised:

"Sonny, don't ever buy any town lots from Bird of Freedom. He never intends to rob anybody, but he's awfully broad minded."

THE TWO men worked with scarcely any conversation during the afternoon. Each was thinking the same disagreeable thought. At the supper table the atmosphere was more lively, and was gay for several hours after the dishes were washed. The visitor fascinated, astounded and annoyed Sam. She did not dress as his sister dressed, but wore what might have been a boy's coat. Her woolen skirt was shorter than Ruth's, and her boots were high and made for rough traveling. She carried a small carpet bag, as was fit for one who traveled widely and alone. Her step was confident and she

carried herself with what was almost a swagger.

She was given to laughing while relating some questionable act of her uncle, and in the next breath she would be hotly defending him from what she suspected was unvoiced condemnation. In short, it was obvious she loved the old man dearly, considered him to be a mischievous child and a constant source of amusement.

She gave a humorous description of how Freedom would hurriedly look through his Indiana wildcat money every morning and sort out what had become worthless over night, so that he might get ahead of the news and pass it. Her recital was interrupted by the sound of a horse running up the slope.

Mr. Strong sprang to the door and threw it open. George Hancey dropped from his exhausted horse and staggered into the light. He was bareheaded, and his eyes were wild as a madman's. He stood in the doorway, clutching the sides with his two hands. For a moment Sam feared he was drunk.

"My father!" he hoarsely exclaimed.

"He's not here, George. You must have passed him," said Strong.

Sagging forward he whispered—

"My father's dead—murdered!"

The four gaped in horror at the terrible announcement. In a barely audible voice Hancey continued:

"Done to death. I was too late. They'd taken him down the river, when I reached Plattsmouth. I followed. The Claim Club ordered him put over the river when he wouldn't give up to their demands."

"But that doesn't mean death!" cried Strong, his voice showing great relief. "That means they just row him to the Iowa side and tell him not to return and—"

"He was murdered in the boat! He never reached the Iowa side. His body was picked up on a sandbar yesterday. Two men were with him, to row him across. He was shot through the head. One of the murderers rode this way."

"Your father killed!" cried Strong.

"Oh, that is terrible! That is terribly wicked! My poor boy! My poor boy!"

"I'm past sympathy, Mr. Strong," Hancey hoarsely broke in. "I'm chasing a murderer; I want a fresh horse—one of yours!"

"You're welcome to all we have."

"What does he look like, George? We'll help you get him," cried young Strong.

"I'm hunting alone. I only ask to swap horses. That'll keep trouble in the Hancey family. I'm all there is of that family. I don't know what the two look like; but the one who rode over the Lancaster road calls himself Hod Feley—you met him, Sam. While I'm changing my saddle, you shall tell me what he looks like."

CHAPTER III

STORMS

THE STRONGS missed the Hanceys. The back lot remained unoccupied. Sam went over late one afternoon and sorrowfully gazed at the ploughed ground. He did not care to go again. The days seemed to be empty after George Hancey rode away to the west in search of his father's murderers. Ruth and her father missed the good fellowship of the man and his son. Travelers in search of food and lodging continued to pull the latch-string. Neighbors, who lacked supplies, came to borrow. Word had traveled for miles that the Stronges had food. The wagonload of provisions brought from Iowa rapidly diminished, but there was no refusal when the needy came up the slope.

Early September brought the first frost, and within ten days the grass was killed to the roots, and fires began to run. There was the smell of smoke in the hazy air—and a yellow sun. The road and ploughed ground were deemed a sufficient fire-guard; but people from the west described the terrific screens of flame that swept over the country.

The first break on the monotony of preparing for winter was the arrival of

George Hancey. His dark face was thinner and looked much older. No joy in the thin lips, but always a hard, set expression. He had met a party of soldiers, returning from Fort Kearny. They told him of a man answering Feley's description back toward the Missouri on the Nebraska City road.

The Strongs endeavored to detain him, but he was flogged on by his great desire and would remain but part of a day and one night. He would not talk much, except when alone with Ruth. To her he explained his plan of making Plattsmouth and dropping down the river to Nebraska City, in the hope of finding Feley. He no longer blamed the Claim Club for the actual slaying of his father, but he remained very bitter against the organization whose verdict had sent his father to death.

"The club voted that he should be put over the river, and left it for Feley and another to row him across. The scoundrels knew he had money on him and they killed to get it."

It was early in the morning that he took back his own horse and started on his quest of vengeance.

A MORE lively intrusion was the unexpected arrival of Bird of Freedom and his whimsical grandniece. They had traveled many miles to the west with the Brackets, had had a narrow escape from fire, and were now on their way to the river. Freedom took the floor directly after supper and talked almost continually until bedtime. His remarks depicted days when the Poncas came to the Niobrara in such numbers as to require a camp of three circles, when the Omahas were so numerous as to camp in two circles. He talked down through the years to the Territory's wildcat currency.

When he entered upon this phase of his lengthy recital, Nancy mischievously broke in to announce:

"Uncle is losing faith in Nebraska money. He's hurrying east to unload."

"No, no! See here, Nancy, a little

more respect for my years and experience," he sternly requested. "The money is good so long as it's kept going, and I must do my part to keep it moving. There's no sense in wintering a lot of private bank money. There is only one bank I don't take to. I shall get rid of all its notes. That's the Platte Valley Bank. The longer I live in this Territory, the more I realize that Michigan knew best how to handle private banks."

"But, Freedom, I've read the commissioners' report of 1839, in which it was printed that in that year there was a million dollars worthless currency circulating in Michigan," said Strong.

"Not worthless if it was kept going," insisted Freedom, pawing at his white beard with one hand and exhibiting a roll of banknotes in the other. "This money in itself is only so much paper. But if you take it for money and pass it for money, it's all right. Banking is only a state of mind. So long as you believe a bank's sound, it is sound. If the three commissioners hadn't been sent to pry into the business of the banks, the money would 'a' kept on circulating, paying debts, buying goods and such like.

"When the commission was sent through Michigan to examine the banks, I was there. The banks were mighty hard to locate. There was one I never did find—at Singapore. Trouble, there, was that the others were found. At that, all would 'a' been well, if not for a mistake. Friends of the banks would keep ahead of the commission with more 'n twenty thousand dollars in specie in a handcart. Sometimes it was nip and tuck whether the specie or the commissioners would reach the bank first. The commission would examine the bank, count the specie, pronounce it safe and start for the next bank.

"Of course, the specie was hurried on ahead of them. Then the commissioners got lost, doubled back on their track and come up to a bank they'd examined the day before. They decided to examine it again, which wa'n't fair, and found only thirty-four dollars, and they made such a

howdydo that folks began to lose confidence. If they hadn't got lost, they'd found the next bank with plenty of specie."

The Stronges endeavored to look grave, but Nancy laughed in keen enjoyment. Freedom, ruffling his beard, commanded:

"You, Nance! Never laugh at your elders."

"I was thinking what a good joke it was on the commissioners," she told him.

Still suspicious, the old man frowned and coldly declared—

"The way Michigan handled her banks till the fool commission got lost is what I call banking."

"And so, good folks, we're hurrying east to put our wild kittens into circulation, so all river people can have more money and prosper," soberly added Nancy.

"A rather foolish way of saying it," stiffly said Freedom, "but that is my plan."

"You were looking for a lost city when I saw you at the Brackets'," reminded Sam.

Nancy commenced laughing. Her uncle stared at her glumly. The girl's amusement increased until tears came.

"It's harder to find than ancient Cibola," she managed to tell the Stronges. "We know just how the river bend looks, but some one has moved the three steamboats, and some one has stolen the county building—"

"Hush your tongue, child," rebuked Freedom. Then to the Stronges he explained, "If I was cheated by the man I bought the city lots of, I shall see the Brackets don't lose a cent. I'll either sell the holdings in St. Louis, or buy myself. Still, the lots are somewhere. Folks don't draw finnified maps of thin air. There's some town with a river bend that that plat will fit on to, and I shall clap the plat on and claim title, regardless of the name of the place. The name's been changed, and that's what's been fooling us. Can Nance come back and stay with you folks a bit when I go down the river?"

"We'd be mighty well pleased to have

her stay right along," assured Strong.

After Ruth and Sam had seconded the invitation, Nancy softly informed—"Uncle's business down river is to help John Brown."

"Be careful, Nance," sharply cautioned Freedom.

"We're free-soilers," quickly informed Strong.

"Lots of folks south of the Platte ain't," muttered the old man.

"You know Brown?" curiously asked Strong.

"Met him a year ago, when he first come to Kansas. Last fall he crossed the Nemaha with one slave. He allowed my advice as to a route to Canada was very helpful. He couldn't take runaways up the Missouri, as Leavenworth, Atchison and other river towns were pro-slavery. Then there was the Sac and Fox reservation blocking his way through part of Ioway. I advised him to travel from near Topeka and travel northwest to Syracuse, then a bit east of north to Falls City. Then Nemaha City, and 'cross the river at Nebraska City. Once he reached Tabor, Ioway, he was safe. I expect he, or Jim Lane, is waiting for me now down at Falls City."

"Why not begin your visit right now, Miss Nancy?" urged Strong.

She shook her head, explaining:

"I must see him to the river or some one will sell him something and cheat him. I'll come back after I've seen him aboard a boat. Where's the young man who lost his father?" This veered the talk to Hancey's terrible fate, and ended the evening's hilarity.

FREEDOM and Strong gravely discussed the proposed secession of the Nebraska country south of the Platte and its annexation to Kansas. Freedom favored the plan, insisting that Kansas was overwhelmingly free-soil. Strong was against it, and insisted that the Territory should not be split up. There was an abundance of other topics to discuss, such as the speculators, the growing uneasiness of the Plains tribes, the hazardous times

in Kansas, the possibility of a national calamity, the bitterness between the Buchanan Democrats and the Douglas Democrats, the development of a new party called "Republican."

All these and many other topics were touched upon. Ruth and her brother felt they were caught up in a whirlwind of mighty events, as they listened to their elders; nor was there any smile on Nancy's face. When Bird of Freedom was not talking on his hobby of wild-cat banks, he was well worth listening to. For a frontier house, the hour was late when the light was extinguished.

The old man and his niece started for the river in the morning. The monotony returned. With no crops to harvest, and with the fall ploughing completed, the Strong's had little to do beyond making their house more winter-proof. Parties of hunters occasionally called and accepted hospitality, but always left smoked elk, deer or buffalo meat. Buffalo robes were cheap, and every house, frame and dugout, had them for beds. Men found that they made warm winter coats.

At the end of November, Strong went alone to Plattsburgh on the chance of procuring more provisions. A cold snap filled the Missouri with ice, and the flat-boat ferry was hauled up. He secured almost a load in the town, however. The wagon returned on December first, with a southwest wind bringing rain. Sam ran out and was promptly ordered by his father to unload, while the horses were being stabled.

"You work sharp, Sam," was the brusque command. "Get everything under cover."

Sam always worked sharp, and his father's tone rather surprised him. On his third trip from house to the wagon he found himself trying to pick up what he supposed was a roll of blankets. It proved to be Nancy Freedom. Her coming was more welcome than sunshine, and Sam whooped like an Indian as he lifted her from the cart. From the sheds his father called—

"That comes of working sharp, son."

Nancy freed herself from the blankets and explained:

"Your pa picked me up in Plattsburgh, just as I was planning to ride out here. I went down river with my uncle as far as Nebraska City. Every man on the river wanted to sell him town lots. There's bound to be a crash. Speculators are hard pushed for money, and land should be cheaper next spring."

Ruth rushed from the house and brought the guest inside. When Strong came in to supper he said:

"This rain will stop all worry about prairie fires. When the winter starts this way, it's a sign it'll be mild and open."

After the supper dishes were washed Ruth stuffed more wood in the stove and complained of being cold. Her father stepped to the door and found that the wind had shifted to the northwest and that the temperature was falling rapidly. When it came time to retire it was bitterly cold. The young folks laughed at Mr. Strong's prophecy. In the morning the light filtering through the small windows was subdued. The outdoors was blurred and smothered with falling snow. The young people made merry with Strong and bantered him about his mild and open winter.

He endured it good naturedly and insisted that it was merely a meteorological gesture.

"By noon the sun will be out and melting this away."

But midday brought no lessening of the semi-darkness. So thickly did the snow come, driven along by a roaring northwest wind, that it was impossible to see more than a few rods when the men went to the sheds after dinner. Strong no longer laughed at the young folks' banter.

It was dark when Sam went to the sheds at three o'clock. His father lighted a lantern and, without a word, went after him. So thickly was the snow falling and so blurred were the windows that Strong could not discern the house from the sheds. He shouted his son's name. The boy was not in either shed.

Overwhelmed with a great fear, the father started back to the house to see whether Sam had passed him by any chance. If Sam were not at the house, he determined to set fire to a haystack and then commence a blind search.

Half-way to the house he collided with a bowed figure. Speech was impossible in the gale. Seizing Sam's arm, he led him to the house. He would have said nothing of the near tragedy but Sam lost no time in confessing:

"You wouldn't believe I could be such a big fool. Actually got turned around after leaving the shed. I must have been awful muddled not to know that I was walking into the wind. When I saw the lantern right before me, I thought it was a light in the house and shining far off. Then, bump! And I'd run into Dad."

Ruth accepted it as an excellent joke on her brother, but Nancy remained very grave. She simply said—

"It was a mighty lucky bump for you, son." Her habit of calling him "son" annoyed Sam. He easily replied:

"Oh, I'd got my bearings after a bit and come back. No snowstorm can fool me for long."

"It doesn't have to fool you very long, son. Any one out in this blow needs God's help. The longer you live here the more respect you'll have for a real snowstorm. There's nothing to slow the wind this side of the Rocky Mountains. Don't ever take any storm out here as a joke."

"The storm is very bewildering," agreed Mr. Strong. "When we have another like this we'll do the chores early."

The next morning brought the same vague light and gave no signs of the storm's abatement. The men shoveled a path to the sheds. The girls, in heavy woolen skirts, knit jackets and hoods, went out and made an adventure of it, and threw snowballs at Sam. By the time they were ready to return to the house the path had disappeared.

The third day revealed the same white river flowing down from the northwestern sky; and in endeavoring to clear

a path to the sheds the men threw the snow higher than their shoulders. On returning to the house, Mr. Strong did not attempt to conceal his fears.

"This will mean terrible suffering and probably loss of life, even if it ends today. It's a new country to me, and I have no idea how the winter will act. People farther back from the river will suffer from the lack of food. The grass and rush beds along the streams are entirely covered. It will be death to game and hard on stock."

"It just can't keep up much longer," Sam insisted.

There was a cessation on the fourth day, but the sun remained hidden. Then, with a brief respite, storm followed storm until it seemed as if the whole world must be buried. Strong began to worry about the supplies, although many settlers had much less. He was thinking of others, however. He explained:

"Once it clears so men can travel, there will be a heavy demand for food. The wind has packed the snow hard enough to walk on. When we can safely do so we must learn how our nearest neighbors have fared. Those who depend on grass and the rush beds for their stock, will be left without a cow, ox or horse. It's only our New England habit of getting some feed into stacks close to the barn that saves our horses."

THERE came a day when the Strongs and Nancy Freedom visited the nearest neighbor, carrying a pack of provisions. After that they never went without a supply of food. Nearly every family was destitute. One man had lost thirty head of cattle; they ran with the first storm down into the valley of the Weeping Water and were imprisoned there by the deep snow. They died of starvation. Wild animals forgot their fear of humans and desperately endeavored to come in from the prairie to find shelter in any patch of timber. Many failed to reach sanctuary and their sharp feet cut through the hard packed snow and made them prisoners. If not

for game killed, while caught in this fashion, many settlers would have starved.

One morning Strong made an inventory and, with a grave face, announced:

"We haven't even enough corn meal to live on, once we get out of bacon, beans and flour. I'm going to Plattsmouth."

"You're a good man, Mr. Strong. You've given away half your food, besides feeding me."

"Tut, tut, child. Let's not have any foolishness. Sam, you come with me to the sheds. We must knock some kind of a sled together."

With New England ingenuity and a natural capacity to make what was needed, the two soon finished an Algonquin sled, which that ancient people named "toboggan." It was twelve feet long and made of thin narrow boards. One end was curved slightly upward and securely lashed. When the work was finished Sam informed his father:

"The girls can't stay alone. You'll have to stay with them."

"What nonsense! You're not going."

"I'm going with you, or I'm going alone. If you try to drive me back, you'll never get beyond the foot of the slope."

Strong straightened and eyed his son steadily, and then said:

"See here, my son, this must be settled

now and here. It's something new for you to set yourself up against my authority."

"In this one matter I'm beyond your authority. I can make the trip easier than you can. With you, or alone."

For a minute Strong stared at him in silence. Then he gruffly warned—

"When a young fellow gets beyond his father's control there's only one thing for him to do."

"Get out and stay out. All right, Dad. I'll do that if I have to. But first I'm going to Plattsmouth after grub. That's absolutely settled."

Respect for their elders and obedience to parental authority was ingrained in many generations of Strongs. For what seemed to each to be an age the two stared at each other. Strong was the first to speak, in a hoarse voice—

"'Honor thy father and thy mother!'"

"Always; and I honor you too much to let you make that trip alone. I would never forgive myself. I'm old enough and strong enough. We were used to snow up in Maine. You stay here and care for the stock. I'll start in the morning unless it storms."

Strong surrendered and said:

"Well, well, Sam; Lord knows I don't want to hold you back from doing what you believe to be your duty. But the girls will be against it."



TO BE CONTINUED



*The story of a criminal ship and a warning
in*

CODE

By L. Paul

THERE was a queer feeling about the ship. "Hush," thought the man who stood by the gangway. That was the apt word. A battered ship, a dirty craft, small, obscene, unseaworthy, of foreign register. And silent—hush! Grim faced men going about their business, sparing no word for him, though they might have talked, he guessed, had they cared to.

This man who watched wore soiled dungarees. There was a day's stubble of beard on his thin face. His expression, when a passing man darted a look at him, was blank. His eyes fell when other eyes probed him. He looked over his shoulder at times, at the rotting dock in the small British port of Beverstock near Liverpool, where this ship, the *Cora*, lay. He had come aboard, nobody knew how. One moment, and the ship end of the gangway, creaking as the current swayed the little tramp, was empty. The next moment he was there. Nor did these others think it strange. They looked as if this

sudden yet stealthy approach was usual, an accustomed thing, an item, strange perhaps to some, yet of little moment in their full lives.

The man in dungarees stood there till the first cheerful man he had seen aboard rolled up, the stout chief engineer.

"That's him," said the chief, and tapped him on the shoulder.

The man winced, turned, and saw, climbing the steep gangway, a man.

"That's him," repeated the stout chief. "Captain Bain."

The man in dungarees saw a tall, glum seafarer, with graying hair, his frowsy shore going linen peeping from sleeves of shiny serge, his lapels greasy; his boots polished long after polish had become a mockery; and, topping all, a master's cap.

This was Captain Bain, right enough. He stopped, stared at the man in dungarees and said briefly—

"Where from?"

"American Bar," the man in dungarees replied.

"Come this way," said the captain. "My name's Bain. This is my cabin. We can talk here. Out on deck talk's barred in port. Who sent you?"

He fell silent, not because he waited for the answer, but more as if he had run down, as if this long speech had been an effort, a breaking down of his accustomed reserve. The man in dungarees waited, as if expecting him to say more, then at last replied:

"Who sent me? Dip Laplace."

He fumbled in the pocket of his dungarees and found a wad of crumpled paper.

"He sent this, too."

The captain of the *Cora* took the paper, opened it, held it up to the beam of light that stole through the grimy port. The man in dungarees sat down on a locker.

"My name's Drake," he remarked.

His eyes were fixed on the captain. He saw a wave of color sweep up over old Bain's weatherbeaten neck, into his cheeks, then recede again.

What the captain read, spelling out large printed words, was this:

Sparklers—they're wise—watch.

The captain of the *Cora* crumpled the paper in his hand.

"You read this, of course?"

"I'm no liar. I did, of course," the man in dungarees mimicked him. "As I said, my name's Drake—"

"And this paper?"

"I've forgotten what was on it," Drake told him.

"Dip gave it to you. Dip grows jocular," the captain laughed harshly. "Are you another of his jokes?"

"I am a passenger."

"I don't carry passengers."

"My kind? Dip sent me, remember."

"You know then; you have money?"

Drake spread five fifty-pound notes out on his knee.

"As bad as that?" The captain whistled. "You could swank aboard a liner for that."

"And swank off across the pond?"

The captain stroked his long jaw re-

flectively. His eyes wandered over Drake's face, stopped for a moment on the wall clock above his head, dropped to the pile of treasury notes and dwelt there.

"As bad as that?" said the captain of the *Cora*. "Not murder?"

"No, Dip sent me. He knows. Need you?"

"Need I? God forbid. Can you swim?"

"Yes, why?"

"You'll have to. I see you don't know the game we play. Better learn before I take your money. You find it—convenient—to travel informally, to land on the other side incognito—No, your name may be Drake, and I don't care if it is or not. Names don't count here. But you wish to land as Drake, unknown to any one. We arrange that. No immigration folk to pester you. No police. We sail for Montreal. Below that city fifty miles or so are islands. Sometimes we go slowly through them, close to land. An active swimmer, dropping overside—you have more money, have you not?"

"Yes, Captain, a little."

"There's a man on one island, there. He has a boat. If you give him more than five pounds, he's robbing you. After that your movements are not my concern."

Again, as the captain paused, Drake had that strange feeling that here was a man talking overmuch—a man more fond of silence.

"And that's all?" Drake asked. "Simple, isn't it?"

"Why do you say that?"

"I feared I'd have to work my passage, and I'm lazy."

The captain of the *Cora* reached for the little pile of notes.

"A man must live," he growled, as if apologizing for his delinquencies. "A man must live, and there's no money in tramp shipping. You'll find a small cabin on the port side—the empty one. It's yours. We sail with the tide. If you come on deck before that and are nabbed—" he patted his pocket where he had stowed those notes—"that's your lookout, Drake."

Drake rose and crossed the little cabin. At the threshold he paused.

"Those other cabins—"

"You are three. The others, you won't meet till we are at sea."

Drake stepped out, dropped down a steep iron stair to the deck, slid into the port alley, where tiny doors formed a row, tried first one, then another, till he found one unlocked, entered, and found himself in a cabin so small that it could scarcely contain a bunk and its occupant at the same time.

Men had watched him—shadowy figures, heads out of the galley, the engine-room, the firehold. They had said nothing, betrayed no surprise at his coming. They were silent men.

"Hush!"

THE SALT wind drifted across the deck of the *Cora*. She was wallowing in the Atlantic.

Drake and the fat chief sat in the lee of the funnel. They had struck up an acquaintance during the first half of the voyage. Drake had traveled; he knew things. The fat chief, a jovial rascal, had the curiosity of a child and a stout man's zest for effortless, vicarious adventure.

The two other passengers had kept apart. There was Quayle, as yet sticking close to his cabin, save at mealtimes when he joined Drake at the captain's table. He had given that name, Quayle, casually, as if it had just occurred to him, as if names were matters of only passing importance.

He was a tall, silent man, middle-aged.

The third passenger messed with the crew. He was a small Liverpool dock rat. He claimed that he had not killed his wife, but had only beaten her. The captain, after discreetly calling up a hospital, found that this was true. Because he had but twenty pounds they had taken him for that. He never came up on the boat deck; he viewed the ocean with ignorant terror and kept behind the high steel bulwarks of the well deck, when he came out for air.

The chief, having a romantic mind, de-

cided that the Liverpool man's wife would probably take a turn for the worse and die. He held that the other passenger, Quayle, was a Bolshevik.

The chief and Drake sat there and yarned through the long sea morning.

"A rum ship," Drake hazarded.

"We are that," the chief grinned, "at home to rum company."

"True, but you know each other; we don't, we passengers."

"Five new faces in the ship's company," the chief laughed. "Ye see, we can't keep 'em. We ship so many passengers that it has made *their* pile easy, or on the way to make it easy. It corrupts the lads. Five new faces—five old 'uns gone to do likewise—on the trail o' easy money. Man, dear, 'tis restless labor is getting to be—"

"Eight of us, new chums, not knowing each other—for five and three is eight."

Drake stared out to sea.

"Eight souls," sighed the chief. "Where they comes from, Gawd only knows. Where they're bound, Gawd don't care; speakin' more exact, nine. For I'd forgot Sparks."

Drake glanced forward. The tall radio man was in his hencoop, a scant twenty feet away. The door was open.

"Why him?"

"Another bird o' passage. D'ye notice his duds?"

"New and fancy."

"Know what the pay is? Man, dear, if he bought them out of wages, he's never had smoke nor drink in years. Ever see a tramp's wireless wonder before? No. Know what I think? He's an absconding Scot. He figured we'd soak him hard for an unconventional passage. You know what you paid, so—"

The chief closed his eyes and gave the details of his imaginative romance in a few low words:

"Sparks gets him a uniform. Eighty bob, mebbe; or steals one. He finds out we're gettin' a new radio man this voyage. An' then, back in port some poor dub brass pounder is wakin' up, mebbe in hospital. And this sport—well, he's on the papers as Sparks, but we lose our

dividend on his passage thereby."

"So you figure him, as you might say, a jailbird of passage."

Drake had raised his voice. The chief clutched his arm.

"Don't ye now; don't rile that one. Man, dear, every time that devilish contraption spits sparks I shudder. Think o' the slander yon lad could spread and nobody knowin'."

"Slander?"

"Slander 'bout—you—or me, M'Ginley. Oh, aye, there's tales he could tell, even if he's new. Would ye believe it?" The old chief rose. "Ye might not; but some o' the lads aboard here has loose tongues. A thing I abhor, personal." And off the old man waddled.

Drake sat there a moment. He was thinking:

"I wonder. Another little swimmer when we come to that island? Will there be four of us in the water? Will the fourth be Sparks? If so—best watch him."

Rising, he added a codicil to this conclusion.

"There's nine aboard, counting myself," he thought, "nine that may be, well, anything. Best start figuring this one out. That'll leave eight. And one of the eight is me, Drake. Wonder what I'll be, when we come to the end of the voyage?"

He glanced aft. The stout chief engineer was there, where he had paused on the stair that led below.

"Them that don't talk here," said M'Ginley, "them that don't talk on this ship—they guesses."

DRAKE slipped forward till he stood by the open door of the wireless coop. The new Sparks looked up.

"Want anything?" he asked.

"Just loafing round." Drake rolled a cigarette slowly, clumsily. "Smoke?"

"Yes."

The wireless man reached for pouch and papers, twisted with swift fingers, struck a match and was exhaling smoke, almost before Drake himself had lighted up.

"You've been in the States?" Drake

asked. "Learned to make a gasper there, didn't you?"

"And you're from the old country, calling a cig that?"

"A good country to come from—and the faster the coming the better," Drake drawled. "Old country's not—healthy."

"For some."

The wireless man bent over his complicated machinery, as it became alive. Drake looked on, wonder in his eyes, almost a childish wonder.

"But that's marvelous," said he. "Words coming out of the air."

"Dot dash dot dash," said the wireless man. "See that smoke yonder? The *Paladin*. She's asking the *Caradoc* if they've met ice. Bergs drifting now, you know."

Drake glanced at the wall clock, then drifted toward the door.

It was eleven o'clock. It was Wednesday—five days since they had left port. This old ruin of a ship was traveling with speed.

The voice of the wireless man followed him.

"I'm Cray; come again," he called. "This packet doesn't run to rules."

Drake turned. He seemed uneasy.

"If—" he began.

"If what?" Cray waited.

"If you hear something with that gadget about a man named Drake, the fewer know—the better. Get me?"

"Don't slip me money." Cray's hand met his, thrust it back. "You'll need all you got. A rum lot, on a rum ship."

"And you as rum as they come," thought Drake, as he walked away.

Cray watched him go.

"Wonder if he knew what was on the air just now," he scowled. "If I shove it to the Old Man will he—well, this time I'm a wireless man. Next time we'll see."

To him, too, this strange ship was saying, "Hush!" Yet his pencil slid over flimsy paper. He rose with a message, took it to the captain on the bridge.

"Rum lot aboard, sir." He handed the message over, winked.

The captain started, backed away into

a wing of the bridge, scanned that message.

"You are right," he replied. "This came in code, I presume?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why not leave it in code. We don't want the world knowing."

"Nobody's seen it, sir, but me."

"Damn you! That's an order. Anything else comes, leave it in code."

Cray went white and was about to speak. Then he checked himself. He walked away; he was thinking.

"Him, too—the Old Man. Wonder what he knows that the world don't, that he's afraid of the world learning? I'll, maybe, find out. I'll see. Tonight, maybe. He might work in. Who knows?"

The captain, staring at the retreating back was staring at words that floated before his eyes.

For that message had read:

All ships. All ships. All ships.

Varnavosk necklace stolen. Suspect at sea.

Watch passengers. Stand by for more.

—SCOTLAND YARD.

The urgency of the thrice repeated "All ships"—that stabbed him, made him wince. Trouble, trouble in large consignments, coming out of the air. Other messages, and the field of search might narrow, perhaps, till it centered on an old tramp wallowing across the Western Ocean; till some swift offshore craft might draw alongside, and some officious jackanapes would climb up the ladder and ask fool questions about eight new faces aboard the *Cora*.

There was trouble on the ship that said, "Hush."

The captain walked stiffly across the bridge and down to his cabin. Cray, on the boat deck, watched him go.

"Yes, we'll use you, my bucko," said Cray. "Now I wonder—" and he stared down on the well deck, forward, where the little Liverpool passenger sprawled on a hatch cover.

"You've got a shiner on your eye, my lad," thought Cray, "and you mess with the crew. They'll be eating any moment

now. I think we'd better not wait. We'll begin with you."

He followed the old captain of the *Cora* to his cabin.

When the passengers who messed with the skipper came in to lunch, that worthy's chair was vacant. Cray it was who greeted them, smiling at Drake, bowing stiffly to tall Quayle.

"Old Man's busy," said Cray. "Don't wait for him, gentlemen."

THAT was Wednesday. On Thursday the fat engineer M'Ginley sought the warm lee of the funnel once more. Drake was there, waiting.

"I made my peace with Cray. If he was mad about what I said, he didn't show it."

"A bad case," the fat old chief growled. "There's more in this ship than ballast. There's a mystery."

"Eight little mysteries," Drake jeered, "of which one is my humble self. Maybe nine, counting Cray. Or ten—"

"What you alludin' to now?"

"You, honest old M'Ginley."

"Me? Man could see clean through me." The chief winked at him. "But look at this code; and all that pencilin' under it is writ by the most talented engineer on the Western Ocean."

Drake glanced down at the flimsy bit of paper. He saw first a jumble of phrases and part words. But below that a penciled legend made sense.

All ships, westbound.

Varnavosk dying. Look for strong man capable killing bare-handed.

No signature this time.

"Where'd you get this?"

Drake stiffened. He glanced forward uneasily; but Cray's blind was drawn on the little window of his cabin. Cray's door was shut.

"Where'd you think? Notice the Old Man yesterday and today?" the old chief asked. "Well, he's fair wild. He come down this mornin' an' asks me to trot along, confidential. We goes to that wife beatin' runt's cabin. The runt is out on deck. Old Man and me, we rip up

the floorboards, we pry apart the bunk."

"Looking for what?"

"He wouldn't tell at first. Then, when we found nothin', he begun to rave about jewelry. Him, that's carried such down-an'-outs before, lookin' for jewelry in that cabin. Told me to shut up. Left me standin' on air, like. So I mooched. Half an hour ago Cray comes down with this. Old Man looks her over, puzzles her out. He was standin' by his cabin. Next he dives in, grabs somethin', pockets it—an' comes out again. Know what he grabbed?"

"No."

"His gun. Me, I grabs somethin' else. This. Now you know as much as I do, unless you know more."

Drake stared at him, then dropped his eyes.

"And if I do?"

"Cray and the Old Man know a heap. My guess is there's been robbery; and now it looks like murder. Like as not the search'll narrer down. Scotland Yard ain't manned by fools. Like as not there'll be other messages. Liverpool runt's been cleared. He don't pack no valuables. There's seven new faces aboard beside him, leavin' Cray out. If things gets hot and they start to search the lot—well—him that has them jewels is like to swing."

"Unless—" Drake seemed to be master of himself now—"unless!"

"Unless the lad slipped 'em to a good natur'd old fool of an engineer. There's places below." Old M'Ginley winked. "Well, if you meet the man aboard here, you tell him."

"Thanks, I will. Cray's blind's gone up." Drake rose. "I'm going to have a chin with him."

"If there's one thing more'n another has hanged fool men, it's words," M'Ginley warned, and left him.

CRAY grinned as Drake opened the door.

"You—you heard anything?" Drake asked, nervously.

"Nothing."

"Thought, maybe, some message might have drifted in; seen you writing a while back."

"There was," Cray laughed. "Fool operator on the *Jessamine* was askin' me if I'd bought my girl that diamond yet."

Drake stood by the table, his lean fingers clasped about its beveled edge. Cray, watching covertly, smiled. That table was shaking, though it was fastened to the floor.

"You're a strong man, ain't you?" Cray asked.

"There's stronger aboard this packet," Drake answered tonelessly. "Where'd the Old Man dig up those new sailormen? Two of them I saw this morning, ramming at that bent stanchion that supports this deck. Take four of me to make one of them."

"That's an idea," Cray smiled, as if relishing his chance to play with this man.

"What is?" Drake frowned. "Makin' one of them from four of me?"

"Then there's Quayle; he's husky, too. Well, beef don't count with me." Cray shoved a chair forward. "Want to listen in?"

He reached for an extra headset, plugged in, adjusted it for Drake, then watched him, keenly, as some faint message came.

"So that's what it sounds like?" Drake looked up. "I've often wondered."

But Cray was busy, writing. His pencil fairly shook as it sped over the paper.

"What's that?"

Drake looked over his shoulder. Too late, Cray shoved a hand over what he had written, for Drake had seen, seen plainly, the uncompleted sentences:

All ships, westbound.
Varnavosk died this morning.
Communicate with us if . . .

"You seen, hey?" Cray fidgeted, seemed annoyed; yet he might be pretending. He was, at any rate, ill at ease.

"You seen? Well, what's a Russky more or less to you or me? Don't tell the Old Man I showed you. The others

came in code. This one's plain English. Best beat it; I've got to take this to the Old Man."

Drake got up and walked silently out. On the threshold Cray stopped him with:

"Ever know any Russians, Drake? Some of them is big men—hard fighters. Take a powerful man to handle them."

"Meaning—" Drake spun about fiercely— "Meaning—"

"You know more'n you let on," Cray laughed. "Thought I'd catch you. You know who Varnavosk was, owner of the Varnavosk necklace? You know why he's dead—"

Drake rolled a cigaret with his usual clumsiness.

"What mobsman doesn't know?" he asked. "Come, come, Cray. You know what sort we passengers are on this dirty little ship. Know Varnavosk and his necklace? Who does not, in my walk of life? What gang but has had their eyes on him and his jewels? And now, that a cleverer man than myself has pulled the trick—"

"So you're a crook," Cray jeered. "So—"

Drake smiled pleasantly.

"Did you think me a lily?" Drake was composed now. "Imagination's a grand thing, Cray. Sometimes it leads men into trouble, though. You've been reading dime novels."

Drake walked away. Cray watched him go aft along the boat deck and down the steep stairs.

"You'll worry, my man," growled Cray. "Now, what's next. Liverpool swine is ruled out. That fool of a skipper—a child could see through him. He's ripped that dub's cabin to pieces. At this rate he'll have the whole ship torn apart, every manjack on edge. Not one'll get by him without him poking and prying. And he's fool enough to make a bad break. So, we're five days from port, and—"

He stared at that last message, which he had left incomplete. With a swift pencil he ended it.

All ships, westbound. Communicate with us if you have news. Proceed with caution.

—SCOTLAND YARD.

"And that," said Cray to himself, as he took the message to the captain of the *Cora*, "that'll hold him for a while. This ship is jammed full of *strong men*."

"SO YOU can't find him, the thief," Cray jeered.

There was no deference in his tone, no respect. Here he sat in the Old Man's cabin and yarned away as if such a thing as discipline had ceased to exist.

"The thief? He's been a murderer for two days." Old Bain scowled at him. "You have me nigh crazy. First we rip up that little rat's cabin—"

"That was you; I just hinted—" Cray began.

"Hinted like you did when that message came about lookin' for a strong man who could kill barehanded!"

"A strong man; you've found several," Cray retorted. "Was it me said it might be one of those two sailors? Oh, yes. I admit I didn't contradict you. I'll say I let you have your way, do your own crude sleuthing, searching that fore-castle. Don't you know that sailormen are a neat lot, even such scum as this? They know this moment that you have been prodding about. And now you say—"

"You put things into my mind, damn you!" The Old Man glowered at him. "I thinks things, and says things, and there ain't no reason to them when said and thought. They ain't my thoughts; they ain't my actions, an'—"

"Mine, of course, hey? I do it all? Mebbe I did this. This came today." Cray shoved a sheet of paper at him. The Old Man ran his eye over a jumble of code, then reached for his book, translated.

"You know what it is?" He lifted his head and stared at Cray. "You know—"

"All ships? No, not this time. The search has narrowed down," Cray grated. "This one is:

"Ships outward bound, Beverstock. Man aboard you. Hold him."

"Which means—" The skipper of the luckless *Cora* waited.

"Us!" Cray's face was tense. "Scotland Yard—they've got a line on us; they're closing in on their man."

"And when—when some detective comes up the ladder— We're nigh into St. Lawrence Gulf—" the Old Man stared out of the grimy port—"When the show-down comes."

"Never such a ship for secrets as this," Cray said. "They'll come for one. They'll find a heap."

"You, for instance," the captain suggested.

"Sure, me an' you. Think I'm sweating over this just for fun? Think I give a damn if they get their man? Me? Hell, no! I got my reasons; so have you. They'll come aboard with the pilot, maybe. They'll begin poking round. Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless the man's ready for them. Then, it's a pat on the back and a clean bill of health for you; and, 'Thanks, my noble radio man; your message was music to our honest ears,' for me." Cray stopped.

"And so—"

Cray leaned closer.

"Get this. There's two men we ain't searched yet—Drake and Quayle. Either one, mebbe—"

The old captain rose.

"We'll start with Quayle, eh?" He made for the door, but he stopped, turned. "You put that into my head, damn ye!"

"What if I did?" Cray cried. "What if I did? Since you have no detective aboard, what price Cray, hey?"

"What price Cray? I'll tell ye. I'd as soon to God we had a detective aboard," the captain growled. "That's what price Cray!" He stumped out.

The wireless man got up slowly and idled about the cabin as if it were his own. That last remark of the skipper's had hit him.

"A detective," said Cray softly. "Maybe we have, at that, my brave old sea-dog. Maybe we have, at that."

He followed the captain on deck and twitched his sleeve. He drew him into a corner.

"I'll do this next job myself," said Cray.

"You mean Quayle?"

"Him. You better stick to your knitting. Talk like a human being at lunch, keep that solemn-faced, secretive Quayle there, until— You ever figure there'll maybe be a reward for them diamonds?"

"Reward?" The old captain of the *Cora* snorted. "Reward? If I can sleep again o' nights, that'll be reward enough."

"I could do with a good sleep myself," Cray laughed. "I might sleep through lunch hour, while Quayle's cabin is empty."

MORNING again and bright sunlight on the Gulf. Tomorrow would see the pilot coming aboard at Father Point. Tomorrow would see, well, something rather ghastly to men who clutched secrets close, who feared the eye of the law.

But today the sun shone. Drake and the old engineer sat there by the funnel.

Old M'Ginley was sleepy. A bearing had been heating. He had not yet been to bed. He had come up for a whiff of fresh air. He was soon wide awake, for Drake, leaning over, whispered—

"I've been thinking what you said."

"I said a heap, laddie."

"About hiding things."

He opened his dungaree suit. The old man saw a long thin packet of brown paper, sealed with wax, tied with many intricate knots.

"I've been thinking—and whispering a bit," Drake went on.

"Oh, aye, doubtless."

M'Ginley's eyes glinted. A chief engineer, he knew, could hide things, where nobody, not even the man who had trusted them to him, could find them.

"Oh, aye," he repeated, "something else has whispered, me bold lad. Fear has, I'm thinking."

Drake's face was blank.

"I told the person what you said. There's been funny work. Cray and the skipper searching yesterday, today, all cabins but mine. Tomorrow—"

"Perhaps yours. Tomorrow the pilot and—"

The old man too was leaning closer. The packet passed.

"If a knot's untied, or a seal broken—my—my friend says there'll be no split," Drake grated.

"Unless he goes where splittin' is hard, save he split rocks," M'Ginley laughed, and he drew back. "That bearin'—it needs a pile o' lookin' after."

He lumbered away. Drake sat there. The man Quayle, the silent, secretive Quayle came up on deck. He walked along. He bent over Drake. He whispered something. Drake sprang to his feet. Quayle was of an age with him, taller by a head, powerfully built.

Both the captain, staring down from the bridge, and Cray, peering out of his little window, saw Drake's fist shoot out—a blow that seemed but to glance off Quayle's jaw. Yet Quayle fell, lay there, knocked out.

Drake walked forward. He beat on Cray's door with his fists, crying:

"What kind of a ship's this? What sort o' man are you? Blabbin'—blabbin'—"

The captain, clutching the bridge rail, leaned over and bawled:

"You keep still, mister. What's wrong with ye? One more crack like that and—"

He paused. Tomorrow, when the pilot and whoever else was waiting came aboard, he would no longer have the power, save to stand dumbly by and watch.

But now, now Cray had his door open and was talking to the enraged Drake. And Drake, calming himself by an effort, was being drawn inside. The captain wished that this strange man Cray would leave that door open. He hoped, at least, that afterward he would tell him frankly what now was going on.

Inside, Cray was talking swiftly:

"What'd he say? Did he tell you I was blabbing?"

"Blabbing. What talking's been done—" Drake paused, as if uncertain. "Forget it. A man don't like to be told he's like to swing. I'm hot headed. I figured mebbe you'd told him what was in that cablegram—the one about Varnavosk bein' dead—mebbe more, too. But—"

"Forget it is right."

Cray was acting strangely. Yesterday he had told the captain that the murderer, supposedly on their ship, must be either Quayle or Drake. Now he seemed to have shifted his views, unless he wished to lull Drake into a state of false security.

"Forget it is right," he grinned, reaching for the spare headset, already adjusted to fit Drake. "Want to listen in a spell? I'm goin' out for a breather. If you hear anything funny call me."

Drake hesitated.

"What you planning to do?"

"Nothing," Cray answered. "Be a sport. Most men'd get hot if you come ravin' at 'em; but me, I'm different. You set there. Forget it!"

"I'll try," Drake scowled. "If the Old Man says anything about that row with Quayle, you tell him it's an old score we were settling."

"Right!"

Cray crossed the threshold and slammed the door shut. Drake listened as he walked down the deck; he heard other footsteps. Out of the window he caught a glimpse of the captain's gray head, then the boatswain, supporting a limp Quayle toward the stair.

"I wonder—" Drake frowned at the wireless set—"what's their next move. And old M'Ginley—what's he doing?"

Old M'Ginley, cutting loose cord after cord, breaking through wax seals, was opening that brown paper parcel.

What he found turned him into a covetous old man, who thought furiously. Finally, one hand fondling his pocket, he climbed heavily down ladders to his own peculiar domain.

ONCE more Cray faced the old skipper in his cabin.

"You saw that?" Bain was eager. He sensed, at last, the end of this mystery. "You saw that Drake and heard him howl about blabbing!"

"Yes," Cray scoffed. "Heard a heap; but I'm not taking that for gospel."

"It must be him. You found nothing in Quayle's cabin?"

"Not yet," Cray answered. "I'm figuring on looking again. Know what I think? They're both in the theft, if not the murder. Take those names. Both birds' names—Quayle and Drake—ain't they? Sort of funny, them both choosing the same sort of monikers for this trip. Like one had thought of one, and the other had followed suit. Crooks are like that."

The captain gazed at him speculatively.

"Cray — crayfish — another zoölogical name. Well, go on. You don't pass as an honest man, Cray. Lay to that. You're no better, if no worse, than the rest aboard this packet. What were you going to say?"

"I got an idea they been passing that necklace from one to t'other," Cray explained. "They had hard words. What if Quayle had it last, after I searched his dump? What if he wouldn't hand over, an' Drake—I been working on him, scaring him—if Drake, I say, figured Quayle was goin' to gyp him? How about that? Mebbe Quayle ain't scared of getting caught. I searched his dump careful. He may figure he ain't suspected no more. He may think, if he is suspected, that we don't know how to search right. And Drake, figurin' he's losin' out, gets mad."

The captain shook his head. Father Point was getting closer. Morning and the pilot would come, and with them—well, iron bars, perhaps; certainly a lost ticket and a lot of trouble. A man couldn't account for three extra men on his ship—and such men.

"I don't know. If we miss this time—" He paused.

"We'll search both cabins," Gray

broke in, "and both at once. You take Quayle's; I'll go for Drake's. We'll win this time."

The captain stared at him.

"We'll do it; but how?"

"Easy," Cray smiled. "That worthless old chief engineer—let him tag on to Drake. They are thick, anyway. As for Quayle—he's battered up, ain't he? Or if he ain't exactly battered, he's shook. Take a couple of men, drag him out, say you're givin' him your room, more light an' air. Sure, he'll suspect, but what can he do? Take them two big sailormen."

"It might be; but when? Drake sticks below of afternoons."

"Tomorrow morning we got a couple of hours," Cray went on. "When we find that necklace—"

"We give it up, and get clear of—"

"Like hell! We keep it!" Cray corrected him. "Or I keep it. Never mind how. I'll pin the job on one of them. Don't you worry."

The captain stared at him, aghast.

"But they'll search the ship."

"Let 'em. They won't find it." Cray got up. "I left Drake in my monkey-house. Best get him out of there. Tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow."

The captain looked out the door, as Cray opened it. The hills of the south shore of the Gulf stood out grim and gray, somber, all shadow. Tomorrow. Well, sooner it comes, sooner over.

THE TWO big sailors dragged Quayle, protesting, out of his cabin. A strangely ungrateful man he seemed. Up on the boat deck Drake heard the row.

"What's that?" he asked.

The old chief, M'Ginley, leaned closer.

"Them—them diamonds," he whispered.

"How'd you know. You've broke the seals," Drake accused.

M'Ginley shrank back.

"Me? What you think? Ain't I acted straight with you?"

"You'd better."

Drake thrust one hand inside his

dungaree suit. Something bulged under his arm. M'Ginley wasn't looking at a paper packet this time.

"You go heeled; don't blame ye," he blustered. "Why pull a gun on me? They're searchin' your cabin."

He told this with the air of one revealing a previous secret.

"They won't find nothin'."

"Not in mine," Drake grated, "but elsewhere, perhaps. You sit still. We've been playing blind man's buff overlong. You sit still. This is loaded, you old fraud. You figure on holding out, hey? Look me in the eye, in ten minutes, and maybe you'll change your mind."

M'Ginley quivered. He was gross mountain of a man, and shaking like jelly.

"Ten minutes. What you mean? Why—"

Drake rose.

"If you value your health, sit tight. If you don't, I play a hard game. I've an ace in the hole. A neat little ace, isn't it, in its shoulder holster. Sit where you are."

The old man watched him as he walked, cat footed, to the stair, and as he slowly disappeared down it.

"Some one is goin' to catch plain hell," said he, "but it won't be me, M'Ginley. Mebbe, when they finish their rough stuff there'll be a nice corpse for Scotland Yard and—what's hid below for M'Ginley."

But M'Ginley was not down in the alleyway; and it was there that things were due to happen.

First the old captain's voice, as he cried through the thin partition between Drake's cabin and Quayle's:

"Come here, for God's sake, Cray! I found somethin' . . ."

Cray, running in from Drake's cabin, saw a velvet covered case, long, narrow, bound with precious metal.

The captain laughed in relief.

"Got our man."

"Where—where'd you find that?"

"There!" The captain kicked a disreputable handbag. "In the lining, sewn

in. I felt it, first shot. Now—"

"Open it, open it," Cray urged. "Let's see."

"It's locked some way; but—"

Old Bain's strong fingers wrapped themselves about the slim thing of metal and velvet. The cords of his wrists stood out for a moment. Then the case was open, cracked like a walnut shell. It was empty. The captain glared at the fragments in his hands. Cray, leaning closer, muttered:

"Never mind. Hang on to that. It's evidence, ain't it? Quayle—he'll tell more, when them detectives get after him. He'll talk. Man can shorten his stretch that way. Unless—" he thrust his face close to the captain's—"unless we find them diamonds, ourselves. Then, this'd do for Quayle; they'd take him on the strength of this. And we'd—"

"To hell with the diamonds!" In the old skipper's voice was relief. "This'll do for me. You keep your gab shut, mister. The least you know the best, I've got Quayle locked in my cabin. He'll stay there. If trouble comes aboard, it comes for him, personal. Not me, nor you, if you're wise. You stop snooping round for them diamonds. I won't have it, I tell you. First thing there'll be a murder—another murder."

Cray, his voice edged, face pale, sneered:

"Changed your tune, hey? Now you found this useless junk, you figure you'll let them diamonds go, hey? But you figure without Cray. I'll have this ship apart, if need be, but I'll lay hands on them stones. I'll—"

"You'll go easy!" Captain Bain thundered. He was becoming himself rapidly now. "You'll keep quiet. There's others besides Quayle can be locked in their cabins, and nothing said of it. And I'm master of this ship, by God!"

"And if—" Cray smiled, though he was still under tension, although that smile was not a pleasant one. "If I told you the truth, would you sing small, I wonder?"

"Truth? My God! Truth?" the badgered skipper rasped. "You tell the

truth? What in hell are you, to tell the truth?"

"A detective," said Cray softly, "a detective."

The captain stared, at first unbelieving; then he wilted. Too many little things on Cray's side. The chances were that he might be. Certainly he'd acted like one at times. And if he were, what of the *Cora*, of her secret sins?

"A detective?" he gasped.

From behind Cray came another voice; the cabin door swung open.

"A detective? That's fine; for there are two of us, then, my dear Cray."

It was Drake. He had his gun. In that tiny cabin a gun in the hand meant mastery. Drake closed the door after him. His gun covered Cray. He disregarded the old captain. Indeed, old Bain hadn't an ounce of trouble making left in him. He was a crushed man. Not one detective, but two! Not one man, who might conceivably be bribed, but two, each knowing his little immigrant game, and, what was worse, each knowing that the other knew. He slumped down on the single bunk. He stared from Cray to Drake, from Drake to Cray. He shook his gray head sadly.

Cray, snarling, turned on him.

"A hell of a captain! Don't you see his game? His turn to hang on to them diamonds. He figures we'll search his room next; likely found out I'd been searching it. He's desperate."

"And a strong man, Cray, which you are not."

Drake reached out suddenly with his left hand, caught both Cray's thin wrists, brought his hands together. Then with his right hand he laid his revolver on the bunk.

"Which you are not, Cray, my man," said Drake.

The captain heard steel jingle, then saw it flash. He heard a faint click. Drake turned to him.

"We'll adjourn to your cabin, Captain. This is a bit crowded."

Glumly the old skipper obeyed. Cray stood there, handcuffed, silent now, as if

with the snapping of the steel handcuffs had gone from him his last chance.

They stumbled out into the alleyway, Drake's steady hand on Cray's elbow. As Cray walked along, men eyed him. He scowled at the first; his face was blank as he passed a second. But when the third man stared, he smiled cockily. He was on parade and would be on parade until Drake and his kind had done their best, or worst. He must act out his part, confidence in every look, every gesture. That was his code; he would follow it.

Despite the reason for his captivity, there was a certain desperate gallantry about Cray, as Drake led him off, handcuffed, to the captain's cabin. He even managed to whisper, as they climbed the steep iron stairway to the boat deck:

"A pretty job, Drake; if your feet didn't look it, nobody'd take you for a dick. Only thing is you got the wrong man."

"Have I?" Drake asked. "Have I? Maybe it's Quayle should be wearing these."

Cray kept silent at that, as if reluctant to tell; as if, now the enemy had appeared in his true form, he were changing his whole tune; as if those under the law's suspicion must close up their ranks and stick together.

"Quayle—there he is in the cabin," Drake went on. "I'll be bound, he'll be glad to see us. You see, Quayle's my partner, Cray."

DRAKE and the old captain were alone. Quayle had taken Cray away, had locked him up, was keeping an eye on him. Drake had remained with Bain. He was talking jerkily, as if thinking back over this business, partly because he rather plumed himself on the way it had been managed and partly because he feared, should he stop, what would follow. Old Captain Bain, there, lips moving, eyes downcast was probably going over the sins of a long and pettily wicked life. Probably, as soon as he got the chance, he'd pour out a flood of

confessions and would incriminate himself hopelessly in a dozen dark matters.

Drake, a one idea man, busy with that one idea, didn't have time, or, to do him justice, inclination for the rôle of father confessor to the captain of the *Cora*. So he talked, like a man talking against time, elliptically, as things came into his head. And the captain half listening, heard:

"Began at Dip's American Bar. Bless you, we at the Yard have known your little game for years, Captain. Began at Dip's, when this robbery thing broke, we traced a motor car within a mile of his place. From then on, well, it was chance and luck and, if I may say it, psychology. We came aboard, Quayle and I, separately. We looked about, used our eyes, wormed in where we could. We had no idea what the man was like, what he had done before. We just played a hunch that he was aboard. Began with you—

"Remember that little note I brought you, ostensibly from Dip? Well, that told me a lot. Bless you, Bain, you aren't the murdering, thieving sort. I ruled you out, right then. But, to go on. You remember when the thing broke aboard? That first message?"

"Yes," the old man nodded glumly, "I won't forget. 'Twas as if some big, horrible eye was lookin' all over, slow but steady. An' I knew that sooner or later it'd stop on us; and then, o' course—"

"That," Drake laughed, hastily breaking in, "that was the intention. I arranged for that wireless. Scotland Yard? Well, we at the Yard don't broadcast what we know, unless we want it known for a damned good reason. I had that wireless sent. Fixed it up in the hour I had between trailing the car to Dip's and coming aboard here. That was my bombshell."

"But—" the captain stared at him, puzzled—"how'd you—you didn't know it was Cray you wanted?"

"What I wanted was a disturbance. If he wasn't in the business he'd perhaps talk. If he hadn't talked, I could fulfill that omission and blame it on him. I

wanted every manjack aboard here to know that diamonds had been stolen, that Scotland Yard—they don't sign themselves that way, I might confess—were on the trail. The rest—well, ever throw a rock into a pool? The ripples follow each other to shore. The rest was plain Cray. I'd struck it lucky. Those other messages—he made 'em up, every one."

"But why—why?" The Old Man was incredulous.

"His game." Drake laughed. "First half of the voyage, well, Cray was lying low. He knew his job, you see. He figured on passing as the regular wireless man; but he didn't know his ship, or its company, and he didn't like that company, when he looked 'em over. So he carried the necklace in his pocket, like a pipe or a handkerchief. Well, the day after that first bombshell of a message came, he felt for the diamonds—and they were gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes, never mind how."

Drake got up, walked across to the old skipper of the *Cora*, flipped one agile hand across his vest and dangled his watch, chain and seals before his eyes.

"Like that," Drake laughed. "Well, to get on, there he was, this Cray, with those jewels gone and nothing for his pains. So he began to get mysterious messages. Bit by bit suspicion formed, centered, first on this one, then on that one. You played right into his hands, Captain. You had me worried. I was afraid you two would run out of suspects before we made our landfall."

"You mean he deliberately had me on?" The captain shook his head. "No—if 'twas just theft—but murder— You mean this man let me think we had a murderer aboard, let me know it, when he could have kept it dark—and him the guilty one? Man don't tie his own hangman's knot, mister, not even to get back diamonds."

"There was no murder." Drake laughed, again. "That was just his artistic touch. No fool, Cray. He knew you'd rise to it. But you worried him. He wanted to

search every last cabin, but he also wanted to make the job hang out till the last moment, in case you might show a rush of brain to the head and get to suspecting him. Well, you did it as he planned, between you. Until, well, there were two of us left, Quayle and myself. Cray was getting scared by now. So, when he searched Quayle's cabin yesterday, he planted the box that those diamonds had been in when he lifted them. Then he worked things so that you would find it, not him."

"But why?"

Drake stared at him. What use going on like this? How could this man, who but half listened, understand, when even he saw some things but vaguely? You threw a straw into the water, then a dozen more. If one of them taught you anything of drift or eddy, you were content. When he spoke again his voice was crisp and incisive.

"That fight. A fake of Quayle and me, in case Cray suspected us of working together, as he did, eh? Just a precaution. It bothered him, as other things did, too. His problem was twofold. Those stories, you see; the wireless messages he was making up—they worked on him in the end, as well as on you. He almost believed them, believed that they might have some accidental truth in them. And, of course, he wanted his loot back. Safety and loot; two ends to gain. If you had it, it was as good as his, for he's smooth and you—well, the thing's plain, isn't it? Notice how he gave in at the end? No gunplay. Clever men don't go in for that. Amateurish, that sort of thing. Watch the papers later on and you'll see how Cray fights through his mouth-piece. Good criminal lawyers are rich men."

"But why all this?" the captain growled. "You knew in mid-Atlantic that he was your man. You had the stuff and could

have nabbed him easily then and there."

"In my game a man never stops learning," Drake told him. "You may believe me, or not. Your ship said, 'Hush.' I wanted to make her talk, and Cray did it for me, eh? I wanted to see what he'd do and how he'd do it. A clever rogue he proved, but too imaginative."

"So you raised hell with us, with me. Let me run round like a fool."

The captain of the *Cora* bit his lip, for who was he, standing in a slippery place, to antagonize this detective. Drake looked at him pityingly for a moment.

"You're worried. You're saying, 'Now Drake'll begin on me.' The answer is, of course, Drake won't. I've known and the Yard's known, for years. If we'd wanted to, we could fill a gaol with you and your like; but what's it to us if now and then some petty thief gets away? Men like that Liverpool rat. It's the big, fat, long whiskered, clever rats we're after. When they come drifting along, flying the country, we know where to look."

He turned toward the door.

"You run our rat trap, Captain. Why in the world should we spring it?"

The door opened as he put his hand on the knob. The fat engineer, M'Ginley, crowded in. He laid something that gleamed and glittered on the little table. Beside this he methodically piled brown paper, broken wax seals, bits of cut and knotted string.

"Ye'll bear witness," said M'Ginley to the captain, "ye'll bear witness, I'm an honest man. There it all is, Mr. Drake, everything ye gave me. I'm an honest man; and besides, there's a ship comin' up astern flyin' the blue ensign, with the Canadian coat-of-arms in the fly of it. I'm an honest man. When they board us, ye'll tell 'em so, doubtless?"

But Drake was not listening. Bending over the table, he was brushing coal dust from the Varnavosk necklace.

*Of a Chinese bandit leader who drank at the Nine
Spirits of Perdition*



BENEVO-
LENCE
brooded
over Cathay.
Libby, sunning
himself against
a hay-cock, his
horse cropping
near, felt Confu-
cian tranquillity.
Philosophical
poise mellowed
the fecund,

UNCLE NNG
and the
PALE BLUE DOG
By Carroll K. Michener

hoary landscape. Certainly there was about it no hint of violence, no suggestion of the banditry that had wrought devastation and horror in these western provinces and made this summer's pill-selling foray the most eventful in his adventurous career.

Down the long, rutted road wound his carts—the four faithful, battered vehicles that bore his argosy of the little pink pellets that cure all ills in credulous old China, from the disorders that come from consuming melons under the wrong limb of the moon to those that cause a jangle of feminine tongues, even upon a sweet spring day, within the innermost apartments.

Nng Ta Jen, his Number One boy, dozed in the first of the carts, immune to the shocks of that springless conveyance.

The drivers, when they had reached Libby's post, brought the caravan to a halt. They were not averse to repose.

Libby let them stay for a time. There was an hour till sunset, and the walls of a village, near at

hand, flamed with ochred reflections; no need to hurry.

Sounds of China's incessant husbandry came sleepily toward their ears. The naked torso of a coolie, carrying wheat to a stone threshing floor, gleamed bronze red with sweat in the level light; his labored ululation was like a song of some extremely old time. Was it possible, thought Libby, that savagery—medieval, Tartarian—lay pregnant in this calm?

Uncle Nng, descending from his cart, showed symptoms of loquacity; allowed them in fact to ripen into speech.

"Observe, Previously Born," he remarked, "the labor of these fields. Greedy, reluctant and rebellious, so is the report to these unworthy ears, toils the man of the western world. Can he, in simple manliness toward his task, equal

the coolie's effort that bursts the heart, his augustly cheerful triumph over the asperities of life? A wholesome example—this worm of a Chinese yokel—unto a world gone mad with enjoying fruits of another's reaping; of gaining where there is nothing risked; of demeaning labor into an unwilling penance for which there must be requital of an indemnity, not of an honest remuneration. Ay yah! But this, indeed, is to be wearied with words."

From such oratory Uncle Nng had preserved enough breath, nonetheless, to project from his throat a thin, yodeling falsetto. His song blended, like the voice of some shepherd's reed, into the mellow vista. And as if created by magic, in response to the call of a mysterious piper, a small mouse of a lad became visible above a bundle of wheat. Comely, lips wide in an adventurous smile, he emerged slowly from the field. Observing the caravan with eyes keen to the wonders of youth, he toyed with a shuttlecock made from the skin of a snake and the feathers of a duck.

Nng, like all China, was verdant with age-old youth. It was needful for the caravan to pause yet a few moments while he conversed gravely with the lad; while he competed—though he was sixty and two—with the amazed and laughing youngster in deftly tossing from his heels the feathered bauble of play.

When the carts moved at last, the boy was beside Nng, upon a dust covered basket, listening to the fair tale of a lad of old times who slaughtered a dragon, married a princess and ruled for the sons of Han.

"The heart of a child," quoted Nng to the sarcastic Libby, "is a thing larger and more precious than eighteen thousand and three blue lotus fields of the blessed lord Buddha. It is an anatomical jewel, innocent of evil."

"Evidently," interposed Libby, "the learned and august has not read Freud."

Uncle Nng had not; but he had perused a translation of the Christian scriptures, and it was recorded there, he recalled, that adults were to be led by a child.

He read also the sayings of Buddha, had committed to memory the Analects of Confucius and understood the philosophies of the sublime Lao Tze.

"Innocent of evil," he resumed, epitomizing this wisdom. "Is not a boy's heart the antidote of evil? He who cultivates a child arms himself with a sure weapon against the harshness of life. By a child shall he be led unto the security of innocence."

But the boy, as it chanced, could lead them, when they had reached the village, to no more than his father's evil smelling inn.

WITHIN the stained walls of his room Libby regarded with distress a further eccentricity of Uncle Nng. The doddering old infant had acquired a new pet. He had begun, on this trip through the western hills, with a shama bird, confined in a red tasseled cage that hung daintily from his wrist when he took the creature forth for an airing. The shama, Nng said, was distinguished for the fact that only when plum-blossoms heralded the season for mating would it consort with its kind. Plum blossoms came and the shama flew away. In its place Nng acquired a pair of chameleons; these gave place in his affections to a *wong* dog of evil persuasion, which in its turn yielded to a Szechuan monkey. Ling, the monkey, whose precocious trick of lighting matches resulted eventually in setting fire to an inn, had now been bartered for the creature whose repulsive entity was housed in a rice basket set casually on Libby's bunk.

Nng removed the lid.

"See here, Reverential!" exclaimed Libby, rising energetically from the *kang*, "if you don't keep that thing out of my sight I'll mash it with a club!"

For answer his irrepressible interpreter, road guide, factotum and philosophical mentor willfully drew forth by its scaly neck six feet of glittering willow green, relieved by a satin white ribbon of belly.

"The mind of the superior man," remarked Nng, smiling, "fears no force of a

lower order. Conscious of his superiority he can be bitten by no reptile, stung by no scorpion; aware of mental elevation he is touched by no serpent of evil, destroyed by no ophidian forked tongue of sin. *Sic semper dammit!*"

Nng's devious erudition, his philosophical profundity, even though couched in the mellifluous syllables of the Mandarin idiom, did not have the effect of soothing Libby's outraged sensibilities. He was tremendously relieved when his Number One boy, after holding before the beady eyes of his pet for an instant the tantalizing exhibit of a dead rat, lowered them both into the bamboo basket. As a bit of counter irritant Nng sang, as he proceeded, a bar from that sprightly air of the Ninth Century, "The Dirge of the White Horse." Whereupon, perceiving at last that the secretion of "wrath-matter" in his employer's countenance was of serious proportions, he set himself industriously upon a divergent affair.

The young man before him had attained less than half of Nng's years, yet the old Chinese bent from the waist in a profound obeisance of respect. His wisp of a whisker became merged with the design of his brocaded tunic. A taloned, leathery hand held out a pair of conventional red scrolls, and Libby, unreeling them, saw their flattering imputation.

"A birthday greeting," intoned Nng, "from one who is to the recipient as a cracked pot upon a heap of refuse to a bright tile on the roof."

"But it's not my birthday, O Egg Addled by Too Much Sitting Upon by Hens," responded Libby, who had not been in China four years without acquiring some of the postures of speech that cling to the classic-minded.

Nng was not discomposed.

"Not the anniversary of the Exalted Elder Brother of Wisdom," he confessed, "but of the Previously Born's Most August Grandmother, who would have reached the reward of one hundred years had she but lived until today."

Libby, deciphering with painful difficulties the huge black ideographs upon the

scrolls, saw that it was so. "Ten thousand years" was the polite wish upon one, and upon the other the five bats of prosperity. He recalled, now, Nng's geneological leanings. Of Nng's own family, the birth dates painted scholarly and fine upon the back of his abacus—fitting escutcheon of the Orient—ambled backward in time for no less than eleven generations. By pestiferous questioning Nng had also gleaned into this record, with a profound intention of respect, not a few exact dates from Libby's irrelevant and remote line. Thus the grandmaternal data.

Nng proceeded to peroration:

"He who would consider himself familiar with the past must peruse five cartloads of books—so runs the phrase in the speech of the humble; but is it needful, Previously Born, to breach the record of times gone past in order to confirm that in former lives we were associated together? There was a mere touching of sleeves, perhaps, in that succession of physical bodies with which we are encumbered upon the cart road to Nirvana; or a mutual wrong in some irrecoverable moment, binding us together once more in this life. Yet it is well, Elder Brother; it is a fragrant pathway we tread together. Sweet has been the lotus bud of association, in these years that have passed over us in the purveyance of pills; sweet as incense of aloes and musk even the adversities of the road. Ay yah! But speech wearies me!"

"Sweet?" Libby echoed. "*Sic semper dammit*—to make use of your own complete Latin-English vocabulary! Sweet as a dunghill, some of it—this inn, for example."

Uncle Nng retained complacency; even a rebuff, sometimes, had the effect of homage to his imperturbable self esteem. He would have spoken further, but there was a sudden diversion from outside the adobe walls of the inn; a cracking of rifles, shouts, the shriek of a woman, and a clattering of hoofs.

Libby sprang to his feet; with Nng following, he made his way into the courtyard where his carts were standing for the

night. There was a despairing thought in Libby's mind concerning the small treasure of silver bullion bolted to the frame of one of these vehicles—the net gleanings of his entire season's business.

"Forty miles from Sung Pao—that near to safety, then to lose it to some hell-brood of bandits!" he muttered to Uncle Nng. "Another sweet lashing to your Nirvana-wheel of fate!"

THE VILLAGE, for the remainder of that night, knew no slumber save death.

There was no escape for the caravan of pills; it was evident to Libby at once that it must share the fortunes of the inn. He was weaponless, as always, and so were his men, upon the theory that a gun invites strife. As for his personal safety he had grown callous. Also he had absorbed some of the fatalism of the East.

"I suppose there's no use rushing into trouble," he remarked to Uncle Nng. "Might as well stay where we are and let it come to us—that'll be plenty soon."

"There is no danger," his stoic No. One boy assured him. "Has the Previously Born at any time perished when the negligible Nng was at hand?"

A reflection of flames lighted the inn courtyard to its uttermost corner. There was the sound of reckless musketry, continuous, unrelenting, but it was evident to Libby that the villagers were making no real resistance. The Chinese, schooled by traditions of four thousand recorded years, had not the habit, he knew, of doing more than bow their heads to violence of this sort. But they understood how to die.

A sansculotte rabble of an army surrounded the inn. It was evident that the place was being preserved for a purpose. And this theory was confirmed when, in the midst of a final burst of savagery outside the gate, a drunken voice became audible, pitched to the key of profane reviling.

"Damned is the man, and damned be his ancestors," the voice cried, "who persists in the rearing of a pale blue dog!"

A horse staggered in over the court-

yard flags, a detachment of soldiery clattering at its heels. Leaning inebriously aslant in the saddle, was a dog faced, giant bodied human dressed like a Tatar in sheepskin coat, fur cap and high boots fashioned from the skin of a yak.

Libby gazed upon this monster with mingled loathing and apprehension; but Nng, wearing an expression of tranquillity, muttered assurance:

"We are as secure, Previously Born, as stones of the Kuen Lun Mountains. This man is Bean Curd, one of the four minor leaders of those bandits who till with swords these peaceful provinces of the west. Bean Curd is no more than a coolie, known to Nng Ta Jen of old; *laodah* of the houseboat in which Nng journeyed, upon occasion, with a gentleman of Shanghai. Suavity of word and deference of deportment will preserve not only our skins but that *sycee* of silver."

With three dorsal bendings of respect, coupled with the proper claspings and unclaspings of obeisant hands, Nng advanced toward the canine creature, still lividly muttering his curse against all breeders of dogs that were in color pale blue.

Uncle Nng and the innkeeper's boy, who still hung at Nng's heels, assisted the leader of outlaws to slide from his saddle.

He was a powerful but ludicrous animal, grave and heavy of countenance. One eye was gone, and his eyebrows seemed to have been singed away. There was a lewd squint from his one remaining instrument of vision, and beneath it and the cavity of the other were puffed sacks of flesh indicative of the disorders that consort with dissipation. His nose was blunt and misshapen. It was set against a sickly background of pocked, opium yellowed skin. There were a few scattered hairs on his upper lip, not quite a mustache. His chin was beardless but scarred, and beneath was a shrunken and sinewy neck. He wore a queue that gathered its sparse hairs from a peaked, battle torn scalp.

There was a squint of slow recognition in the bleared eye of Bean Curd. He left

off his reviling, and leaned, sotted and maudlin, against the brotherly shoulder of Uncle Nng. Commands, sputtering and loud, came from his lips. Let there be food, drink; let tables be brought to the inn courtyard! He would feast with Nng, his Great Elder Brother; feast even with Nng's foreign devil of a friend.

The boy, agape with his wonder, stood too near to Bean Curd's rude feet. Petulantly, the giant hurled him away. Bruised and howling, the boy lay for an instant with his face in the muck of the yard, then ran with fear and rage toward the safety of a shadow.

At bayonet point, frightened servants were driven forth to appease the desire of Celestial Nero. Tables were brought; wine, and eventually food. And while the village flamed as a torch for his banquet, Bean Curd nourished his inebriation.

Libby sat sullenly at the board, filled with nausea; the hot rice wine he could not drink, thinking of the blood that flowed in the streets and in secret corners where cries for mercy had gurgled into the horror of death.

But Nng appeared gay. He played blithely at *mora*, the game of drinking forfeits that depends upon nimbleness of finger and alertness of eye. Seldom losing, he seldom drank; losing often, Bean Curd sank lower in his seat with increasing inebriety.

Though he was innocent of intoxication, Uncle Nng became nonetheless garrulous of humor. Then, while amusement still shook the loose wattle of tissues that hung from his chin, he grew discursive and verbose upon the subject of snakes and their subtle business of fascination and death. Libby's gorge rose, but diminished again at sight of the blue terror glazing Bean Curd's eyes. He began to understand in Nng the devious twistings of some purpose.

Uncle Nng's leathery hands were industrious, meantime, in some trivial affair with a strip of green paper. He spilled wine, presently, upon this whimsical contrivance, and with an air of pleas-

ant expectancy observed it writhing into the semblance of a serpent.

There was a howl from Bean Curd, who staggered to his feet, endeavoring with tipsy haste to escape the sight of this phenomenon. He was slow to answer the smile with which Nng swept his plaything away, excusing his jest.

The village flames flared lower, but there was no need to bring other torches. Dawn came peering over the walls of the courtyard, and lighted Bean Curd to drunken slumber.

There was a stir among his retainers. Solemnly, as if engaged in some sepulchral ceremony, they brought in through the gate an oblong box under a canvas shield. Setting down their burden in the center of the yard, a sergeant removed the cover, and revealed to Libby and Uncle Ung such a coffin as only a prince might decently afford. It was Brobdingnagian in size, massive in the thickness of its red lacquered wood.

With tenderness of fear, not of respect, they lifted the sotted chief into this silk lined "mansion of longevity."

Military was the precision with which a tent provided housing, and a sentry was set to secure the drunkard's sleep.

LIBBY, once more upon his *kang*, nursed weariness and anger.

"See here, Reverential," he commanded of Uncle Nng, "isn't there something we can do about this pale blue dog?"

Nng chuckled, removing for a solicitous instant the lid of his pet's bucket.

"Speech from the Previously Born," said he, "has the pungency of wit. He is a dog, pale blue, this leader of bandits. The name of his creature of myth, reared by that person of fiction whom Bean Curd reviles, is fitting to him as the boots to his feet."

"But where does he get the expression? It's a new one to me."

Nng chuckled again.

"A servile fellow," he remarked, "is this dog, Bean Curd, fearing always to give an offense. He was forever thus, cowardly discreet. Though he is powerful

now, the habit clings. When he must revile, in his drunken stupors, he is careful to avoid affront; he besmirches no forebear, muddies no character save that infrequent person who would so defile nature as to rear pale blue dogs. Ay yah! *Sic semper dammit!* Speech, when conversing with this beast, leaves one humid with fatigue."

Nng prepared for repose.

"See here," protested Libby once more. "Aren't we going to make a break for it while Bean Curd sleeps?"

But Uncle Nng inclined his head in a grave negative.

"Danger," said he, "lies now upon the roads, not here. Can the mind of the superior man fear one of a lower order? Bean Curd shall drink at Nine Springs of Perdition before one more rising of the moon."

LIBBY lay alert through Nng's sibilant breathing.

Sounds of catastrophe in the streets, now, were reduced to the voice of riot, the snarl of surfeit.

He was sick with the sense of his impotence; the callousness of the East had not wholly erased his western chivalry of soul for the succor of the oppressed. And still he was helpless.

He marvelled at the calm assurance of Uncle Nng, expressed in slumber. His own nerves were jagged with unalloyed apprehension. But Nng, he knew, was devious and oblique. Had he, as always, some naïve, still nebulous, design?

A stir in the courtyard disturbed him. He worried about the carts, yet considered it discreet to remain where he was.

There was a sound at the door of the room, and a stumbling entrance. Libby made out the figure of Bean Curd's sergeant of the guard, a prime minister of evil and yet of sober countenance. With him were four men, each with bayonet-fixed rifle.

"Get up, spawn of a foreign turtle!" the sergeant commanded.

And though he itched for reprisal, Libby saw that there was no choice but

to comply. The sergeant's boot caressed the person of Uncle Nng, whose diapason of snores came to an abrupt pause.

Nng was cheerfully philosophical while they were being fettered.

"Hemp," he quoted from some profundity of the classics, "is no bond to the superior mind."

"It is galling, nevertheless," responded Libby, writhing against his cords, "to one's mean and contemptible flesh."

Together they were laid upon aromatic flagstones in Bean Curd's tented palace of refreshment and sleep. They could hear, over the edge of the chief's "golden peck of longevity" the harsh exhaust of his breathing.

"In the gold of the classics is it graven," reflected Nng, molding his body to the asperity of the stones and sneezing from the airs that blew cold upon his baldness, "that the superior man takes no thought of bewailing heaven and earth for the pains of existence. Ay yah! But speech wearies the tongue. It would be well for us to sleep."

The true Oriental takes his repose in the midst of no matter what alarm of birth, calamity or death; so slept Nng. Libby, who had absorbed into himself so much that was Eastern, had not yet mastered the secret of this phenomenon. He was exasperated, therefore, as the morning ripened toward noon, and his muscles ached against the stones while Nng dozed into oblivion.

From afar the sergeant watched with a malevolent eye.

The village, beyond the inn walls, still echoed of violence. Subtly the reek of death hung over the place, curiously symbolized in the catafalque with its stertorous author embalmed in drunkenness within. To provide one's casket, in China, against the day of its need, was no new thing to Libby, but here was a whim transcending usage and dignity—the perversion of the tomb into a primitive Pullman!

When the sun had poised at the zenith before its afternoon decline, there was a stir in the coffin. Libby observed over

its edge the bleared countenance of Bean Curd, awake to the day. It was more repulsive than by night; like greased pumice, or the rind of a melon that has been pecked at by hens; like sand scattered by firecrackers, or the nest of a wasp hung topside down.

The sergeant hastened to attend. And while a pipe for the smoking of opium was brought to soothe Bean Curd's after-pains of inebriation, there was a relation of the indictment against Libby and Nng.

Bean Curd leered at them in silence.

"These swine," charged the sergeant, "are devils from hell. Have I not seen them in more than one form? I was the attendant of him who was the Magistrate Wang. And was it not such a baldheaded hedgehog as either of these who stole from Wang's bed the bones of his cut-off leg, thus encompassing his death? I, also, was chief executioner for General Po. He would have lived had not these monkey tailed offspring of a turtle escaped from my whetted knife. The pills of these workers of magic—O Mellow and Incomparable—are they not made from the brains of young children boiled in the brine of fat sows? If it is the desire of your Excellency to die, then feast them again and let them go as they will. But would Your Holiness continue to live? Then leave them to me. First shall their eyes pop outward—the trick is well known, is it not, to the Heavenly and Pure?—a hollow stick fitting the ball, a blow at the end, and like a pit from the squeezed plum does the eye burst forth."

Bean Curd listened with muddy attention; yet he appeared to comprehend. His head nodded as he inhaled the thick fumes of his pipe.

"Let them wait," he commanded. "I would view this affair. But for the moment it is needful, by the pimple of illegitimacy that rears dogs pale blue, to consume blissful black smoke."

WHILE Bean Curd drifted, under the seduction of his pipe, over lotus-petaled carpets in the palaces of Elysium, Libby waited in cold terror, beside the

calm faced Nng, for an issue of his fate. He could see the sergeant, in a corner of the yard, busy with the fabrication of his instrument of torture, a bamboo cylinder at which he whittled with his knife. The sergeant amused himself, at intervals, by fitting it to his captives' eyes, remarking at last that it was ready for its work. To increase the security of their bonds, and to add yet another drop to the goblet of their misery, he fixed cangues to their necks. Encumbered by these old fashioned wooden cravats they could no longer lie prone, but must sit in a humiliating and most enervating posture.

Libby abandoned himself to weariness and despair. He paid little attention to his surroundings as the afternoon wore on. The sentry before the tent drifted away to a bowl of tea, and there was drowsiness in the yard. Even the sergeant was no longer visible. The violence of the streets had calmed to no more than an occasional soldierly quarrel over some item of loot. Sentries at the gate kept the rabble of outlaws aloof from the inn while Bean Curd slept.

But presently Libby became alert to the sound of a thin, yodeling falsetto from Uncle Nng's throat. It was like the voice of some shepherd's reed, echoing from the crannies of the inn's startled walls.

Libby wondered dully if Uncle Nng's accustomed sanity of mind had seeped away under the strain; then he remembered the song, on that foregoing afternoon, which had roused like an elf from behind a shock of wheat the boy who had guided them here to the inn. It was the same piping, inveigling air.

The song stopped, and Libby heard words from Uncle Nng's voice, mellow and persuasive. He looked up and saw that the innkeeper's mouse of a boy had materialized abruptly, eying their predicament with amazed and timid curiosity.

Words poured into the lad's ears from the seductive palate of Uncle Nng, but the boy, shaking his head and looking about him in terror, ran away without speech.

An expression of anxiety wrinkled the leathered countenance of Uncle Nng.

but in a little while, to his evident relief, the boy returned, staggering beneath the bulk of Nng's sinister wicker basket.

The sentry shouted, came running with a curse to interrupt this curious errand. But with a burst of agility the boy reached his goal. He stumbled, and the lid of the basket rolled over his head. Regaining his feet there was time for no more than to topple his burden into Bean Curd's coffin.

In haste to repair this sacrilege the sentry seized upon the basket, saw that it was empty, observed that Bean Curd still slept, then retired once more to his tea, muttering against the vanished urchin's unaccountable prank.

But presently there was a cry, stifled, maudlin, as if proceeding from a throat paralyzed with fear. The sergeant loped toward the tent and peered under the canvas; then his eyes glassed with terror as he saw what to Libby and Nng was invisible to the eye but to the imagination palpable.

Nng's serpent, willow green, head poised for a swift dart of anger, lay coiled upon Bean Curd's breast.

The sergeant, snatching the stupefied sentry's rifle, held it ready to fire, then hesitated, unconfident of his aim. He lowered the gun, at some flurried glimmering of a new notion of succor; ran, trailing it by the barrel, with a shouted order at his lips to the men at the gate.

But it was a command that faded into the abrupt detonation of his weapon; against a post of the tent it had caught and exploded, rendering the sergeant no more than an inert, bleeding accretion to the mire of the court.

Panic seized the sentry, and he ran shouting through the gate that devils fouled the inn; men bolder than he pushed toward the tent, gazed at the livid, fear swollen death mask of Bean Curd, and fled in their turn.

The cry rose in the streets that their leader had perished; that he was obsessed with demons; that the inn was accursed. The rabble of Bean Curd began moving to the roads; the besotted were roused,

the covetous tied up their loot; and there was slinking away into the cover of night.

"Burn! Burn!" shouted the braver; and fagots were piled, with confusion and swiftness, against the inn walls.

AT DAWN, enthroned in his cart, a wicker basket beside him and Libby's bullion beneath his hams, Nng Ta Jen with absent mind viewed the heap of hot ashes that had once been the inn. He began to speak, calmly, reverting to philosophies that had been previously intoned from his warehouse of memory.

"Larger and more precious than eighteen thousand and three pale blue lotus fields of the blessed lord Buddha is the heart of a child," said he. "Innocent of evil, and the antidote of evil. And he who cultivates a child arms himself with a weapon that is stronger than bullets against the asperities of life."

But Libby did not trust wholly to this abstrusity as the cause of his deliverance. Nng called it, of course, the "weapon of wit;" but to Libby it was Nng's preposterous good luck that had snatched them once more from the precipice of death.

"See here," he demanded, pointing to the basket; "now that this ophidian familiar of yours has had a morsel of blood won't he be more dangerous than ever? I don't mean to be ungrateful, but a snake's a snake to me, even if he has saved my life. Why not plant him there, among the ruins, as Bean Curd's companion in the various hells?"

Nng puffed scornfully at his pipe, tapped and put it away.

"Does not the Previously Born understand that a keen sword of wisdom, not the fang of a serpent, sent the reviler of him who rears dogs pale blue into the River of Souls? This is a snake without fangs, an avenger without venom; his poison has long since been withdrawn from his teeth. Not the body of Bean Curd, the bandit, but the brain, rotted with drink and the perfume of poppies, was the part first to die—the spot that was vulnerable to the weapon of wit."

A story of Accordion Alex and the rough,

By **THE DANCE HALL**
James Stevens

*who wrote "Paul Bunyan" and
"Brawnyman"*

THE YANKEE captain, Robert Gray, discovered the river, and John Jacob Astor's fur traders founded the town. Fishermen reached the Columbia in the 'fifties. The bull-team loggers came in the early 'eighties. By 1890 Astoria was a booming fishing and lumber port. There were fifty saloons and dance halls.

On Astor Street the sign of the Coach and Horses made British sailors remember the pubs at home and brought them to its bar. On Astor Street two bands played at nightfall and piped the frontier laborers through dance hall doors. Shanghaiing was a flourishing industry in the sailors' boarding houses. Crimps, gamblers and bartenders waxed fat, and the dancing girls wore diamonds. It was rough revelry among the loggers, sailors and fishermen.

A man went down on Astor Street just to raise hell, to tear loose from hard labor. Astor Street rang with laughter and shone with light. There a man could set his foot on a polished rail, lean his elbow on shining wood, see a dazzle of mirrors and glasses, hear sweet talk from a woman, and feel such a warm, tickling pleasure drowsing through his blood, that the stench and filth of forecastle and bunk shanty, and the grinding, sleepless hours with the nets in wind and fog were forgotten.

There on Astor Street the laborer's mean savings purchased him a moment's freedom from twelve hour labor and bitter living. He had liberty. He was a free



man. Men who wore diamonds shook his hand. Perfumed women smiled up from his arms. It was too much. He had to tear loose and raise hell in sheer joy of escape. Bruised and sick, robbed and wretched, he usually was when he returned to camp, forecastle or fisherman's shack. Yet, Astor Street remained the glamor of his life.

So it was in the life of Accordion Alex. He was an Astoria fisherman in the days of a thousand sails. The Columbia River salmon fishermen now use motor launches instead of sailboats. They have a union. They own automobiles and radios. Prohibition has left Astor Street a row of dismal, deserted shacks. The younger fishermen do not care. They have a fat, contented life; their labor is easy to bear. But the old fishermen remember old Astor Street with yearning, and they speak of it with more gusto than shame. They remember the old times, the old characters, the surging vital life of frontier labor. They tell the story of Accordion Alex.

colorful days of a North Pacific boom town

FISHERMAN



"He disappeared," they say. "Just disappeared. So many of the old characters went off that way and dropped out of sight. Nobody can tell where they are. Accordion Alex was a character. Everybody who knew the sailing days remembers his accordion playing. He was a little cracked, because he didn't want to play the accordion in a dance hall. He wanted to fish, wanted to battle the old devil of a river. Wouldn't you say he was cracked, now?"

II

THE STEAMER swerved to follow the channel around a long island, and the churning sternwheel dashed spray over the aft rail, where Alex Bergstrom stood. He moved forward, closer to the noisy group of salmon fishermen. They were speaking in Norwegian, but they mixed American speech with it, words strange to Alex. Ever since the steamboat had left Portland, he had been trying to get up courage to talk to the fisher-

men. But he was so homesick and he felt such a greenhorn.

The big, blond fishermen swaggered over the deck as if they owned both the steamboat and the river. They seemed more like Americans than like people of the old country. They made Alex feel very young and very small, in spite of his big shoulders, his bulky chest and the height at which his tousele of yellow hair waved in the April breeze and shone in the April sunlight. He felt weak and listless, with a longing for home. The nearer he got to Uncle Eric and his journey's end, the more this longing oppressed him.

There was a girl on the steamboat who was almost the image of Helga. Only Helga had never looked at him with such bold eyes, and Helga didn't paint her face. The fishermen knew this girl and the dark woman with her. She smiled at the broad remarks that were passed when she and the dark woman walked along the deck. A loose girl, Alex decided contemptuously. But she was slim and blue eyed. *Jah*, like Helga.

Alex bowed his head over the rail, gazed unseeingly at the foamy wash of water along the steamboat's side and dreamed of a little fishing town on a Norwegian shore. The old country, where he and his kin had made such a lean living, was now a wonderful place in his thoughts, the meagerly rewarded labor there forgotten.

Jah, they were good, the fiords blown over by freezing winds—good, when there was a crackle and a shine from the fireplace on the frosty nights; when there was hot fish on the table; when you could tramp up the mountainside to the three pines— Helga playing with her yellow braids and her blue eyes sending shy glances from their soft corners while his accordion crooned— That was the good life.

He, young Alex Bergstrom, might make

many dollars here in America, but he would find nothing to make life so pleasant as it was in the old country. He wished the steamboat would reach Astoria soon. He longed for the handclasp of Uncle Eric. Ten years since he had seen Uncle Eric, but Alex had never forgotten the tremendous man with the slow, booming laugh, the hearty voice and the big fingers that were so lively on the accordion keys.

Alex still had the accordion that Uncle Eric had given the small nephew when he left Norway to find a fortune in American fishing. Alex had brought it in his telescope valise. But he hadn't played it any during his journey, for even the sight of the shiny instrument made him sick with yearnings for the evenings at home, sick for the evenings with Helga, sick for the dancing of summer holidays. And here he was, far away on the great Columbia River of America, here to go salmon fishing with Uncle Eric. Here for gold. *Jah, for gold.*

The fishermen were talking and arguing now about their trade. Alex listened. He listened, and heard of the dangers of fishing at the river's mouth, where many a boat had been swept over the bar in the ebb tide and the captain and his boat puller drowned. That bar was the roughest on all the oceans . . . There was fishing in the Sacramento River of California, Austrian and Italian fishermen there, and they came up on ocean steamers for the Columbia salmon run.

Alaska would be the great fishing coast . . . a cold land that, like the old country . . . In the Fraser River of British Columbia the salmon fishing was getting good, too . . . And there was the great Puget Sound . . . But the Columbia River was best. There was no salmon like the royal chinook. *Jah, the royal chinook.* Not for them red springs or white springs, chohos, bluebacks, steelheads, sockeyes or silversides.

Astoria, that was the fishing port! The river bar was a devil, and the river was an old devil, too, in the spring blows, but Astoria, with her fine dance halls and

saloons; with every kind of ocean ship any one could imagine rolling over the bar and up the ten miles of estuary to the port; with logging camps and sawmills right at the town; with the great city of Portland just a day's steamboat ride away—*jah*, Astoria was the finest place alive for a fisherman.

Alex Bergstrom imagined he might feel the same way, once he was over his homesickness and had got used to living in America. The great gray river, all splashed with sunlight, was beautiful to see; and the tall Douglas firs and hemlocks grew so thick along the banks that it was like a giant hedge on each side of the river. The steamboat glided past schooners, clippers and brigs being towed upstream to Portland, the city on the Willamette River.

An ocean steamer plowed against the current, its smoke making a coaly smudge on the bright blue of the sky. The white wood smoke of a sawmill curled above the green of a timbered plain. Below it a small steamboat was fighting the current, towing up a boom of logs. Above it was a landing. The passenger steamboat sheered toward the shore.

Four bearded men, dressed in heavy blanket coats, red shirts and overalls with the legs staged above the tops of calked boots, boarded the steamboat at the landing. They were loud voiced and profane, and they swigged hearty drinks from bottles carried in their coat pockets. Alex learned that they were loggers bound for the Astoria ox-team camps. The Norwegian fishermen looked on them with some hostility and spoke of them with more contempt.

Alex marveled at the leader of the loggers, a red whiskered giant who called himself Crooked Mouth Scotty. He was genial and exuberant, and he soon became acquainted with most of the passengers. Scotty talked like an equal to the gentry in fine raiment, never making a motion to remove his battered hat. America was a strange country. Alex couldn't imagine himself talking to gentry without taking off his cap. It seemed

very wrong to Alex, like swearing in a church.

If you were a fisherman or a woodsman, you didn't speak so to gentry in the old country. And you didn't walk up to a girl before a crowd and try to put your arm around her. But maybe this wasn't a loose girl—*heil!* That was a good slap she gave him! Scotty retreated to the rail and took a drink, while his friends jeered him. The slim, blue eyed girl and the dark woman moved on past Alex. She didn't stare boldly at him this time. She might be a good girl, even if she did wear paint—a good girl who might like his accordion playing. Maybe so. The thought made Alex see the brightness of the river and sky and the pleasant green shore.

The steamboat made another landing. Then it swept out into a channel that ran for miles with hardly a bend. More than twenty river boats and ocean ships dotted this stretch of water. Fishing craft were already lifting their snowy sails over the stream, and on the wharves of the squat, one story cannery buildings nets were stretched over racks. The fishermen were getting their gear into shape. The great salmon run to the spawning grounds at the heads of mountain streams was about to begin.

Alex leaned on the rail and gazed now at the green hilly shore, now at the waves in the steamboat's wake. Snags, boards and chunks of wood rocked on the waves. Alex watched them idly. He had no premonition of the battles he would have with the river débris in the fishing. It looked like it would be tame labor on this calm river.

This would be nothing like the hard, savage life of fishing through the winter in the old country.

But there were hundreds of steamboats on the river; winds would blow and fogs would drift; and there were the rampaging breakers at the river's mouth. The veteran fishermen could have told Alex much more about the perils of fishing for the royal chinook in the Great River of the West.

III

THE STEAMBOAT glided on from landing to landing. The gentry promenaded with their women folk. Crooked Mouth Scotty and his friends made one group of loungers along the rail. The fishermen were in the bow of the boat. The sun at last was behind the trees and the river wore a dazzling flush.

A gong rang, and Alex joined the other passengers in the dining saloon. He made a bottle of beer and a sandwich do for his supper. When he came out on deck again the sun was out of sight. Between the hills the masses of trees were turning to deep black shadows. As the last thread of color faded out of the sky, the shadows crept from the shore over the river. Small lights glimmered up and down the channel. A wind slashed up so suddenly from the West that it seemed to be snapped from the stroke of a great whip. Alex faced it for a few moments, then he turned to the warm comfort of the passenger saloon.

Most of the men passengers were in the smoking room, where a couple of river gamblers had a poker game flourishing. The air was blue with streamers and puffs of smoke. Alex felt no interest in the poker game, nor in the groups of men who were drinking beer, puffing on pipes and telling stories with yells of laughter.

Alex took a seat in the saloon near the dark corner where he had left his bundle and telescope valise. He sat in mournful quiet for a while; then he noticed that the slim girl and the dark woman were seated on the other side of the room. He only glanced at them, but he was certain that the girl had tried to catch and hold that glance with her bold smile.

He had been a fool to think she might be a good girl like Helga. She was a bold one, a hussy. He could never play the accordion for her as he had played it up in the three pines—so long ago! *Jah*, so long ago! Everything was long ago and far away—*heil!* He was a weak one; he was a fool; but she was slim and blue

eyed, and maybe she wasn't a loose one after all.

Alex didn't look at the girl any more just then, but he unbuckled the straps of his valise and got out the old accordion, the gift from Uncle Eric. Alex didn't look at her, even when he began to pump the accordion gently and made it croon an old country tune. He didn't look, but he thought and imagined, and the music didn't make him homesick at all. He knew she was listening. Such a girl must like the music of an accordion; and Alex knew he could play better than anybody.

Two tunes were crooned; then he glanced across the room again. *Jah*, she was looking! And she was smiling, too. The little one was touched, eh? Well! Alex felt his cheeks grow warm. He played louder and his blood raced from intoxication with his own music. His blue eyes glowed. He shook his cap to the back of his head, and strands of thick, yellow hair waggled down rakishly above his eyes. His right foot began to thump the floor in time. Another tune. Louder now.

"She'll come over here in a little while."

But here came those big, lumbering fools of fishermen. They had to come and make great, bothersome nuisances of themselves, each one begging for a favorite old country tune. Alex played every one asked for, responding to every request with a marked air of contemptuous superiority. They might be veteran fishermen; but he, Alex Bergstrom, the young greenhorn, was the big man now! Alex felt his size and strength again.

He swung to his feet, towering with the tallest of the fishermen. He leaned jauntily against a post in the center of the room. He crashed some chords from the accordion, threw back his head and sang a Norwegian love song in a roaring tenor. When he finished, a crowd was pressing around him. Even the gentry were there. And the blue eyes of the slim girl were smiling up from the level of his shoulder. *Hei!* He knew he could bring her around!

"Play some chords, Ole, and I'll give ye a real song!" a voice growled.

Alex did not understand, of course. The girl translated for him, and he nodded condescendingly. The new singer was the red bearded logger, Crooked Mouth Scotty. He began to roar out the Canadian lumberjack ballad, "The Island Boys", and Alex played the chords in perfect time and with many frills.

Scotty's voice was like thunder, and it must have carried to both the Oregon and Washington shores. But it had deep music in it, and there was great applause at the end. Scotty parted his red mustache, cleared his throat and gave the audience a sad sailor ballad.

Long years have passed; he comes no more
To his weeping bride on the lonely shore.
"My soul to God, my body in the sea!
The big blue waves will roll over me!"

Toral—lal—lal—toral—lal—lay—
Toral—lal—lal—toral—lal—lay!

At this last verse and chorus Crooked Mouth Scotty received such hearty applause that he hardly stopped to part his mustache and wipe his mouth before he started roaring "Silver Jack." Then came "The Little Old Log Cabin In The Lane" and other ballads of the day.

Alex received his own share of the cheers. He glowed with pride from his toes to his hair. This was a grand triumph. All of the passengers on the steamboat—the gentry, the veteran fishermen, the loggers, even some of the poker players from the gambling tables—were crowded around himself and the red bearded logger. And the slim girl was at his shoulder. He smiled into her blue eyes as he played, and her blue eyes smiled back at him. Alex was sure now that she was a good girl; but she ought not to wear so much paint on her pretty face.

THE SINGING and accordion playing went on until the steamboat whistle boomed for Astoria. The crowd quickly broke up. Crooked Mouth Scotty passed his bottle around. Alex downed a large drink. The fishermen passed their bottles around, also. By the

time Alex had his accordion packed again, there was fire in his heart and a wild dance of thoughts in his head. Ah, it was wonderful, this America. He would never be homesick again. *Jah*, he would be happy here.

"You are a great fellow with the accordion, but I'd like to hear you sing some more of the old country love songs," the girl spoke in Norwegian from behind him.

"I'll play and sing some just for you—sometime."

"I knew you would; but listen. Madam Rosa here would like for you to play in her dance hall. You can make more crowns a week than by fishing." He was gazing down into her blue eyes now and they smiled. "I am one of Madam Rosa's girls. I want you to play at our place. They call me Tina. You can call me Tina, too."

Alex was dazzled by the idea of making so much money just by playing the accordion. But there was something about the idea he didn't like. He was no John-leap-without-looking. No Bergstrom ever was.

"I go to my uncle," he said. "First I must talk with my uncle."

"Oh, your uncle will tell you a man is a fool to be a salmon fisherman!" said Tina, with a scornful toss of her yellow head.

"So?" growled one of the fishermen, who had overheard her. "We are fools, eh? It is so. You wenches get our money. *Jah*, we are fools."

"Oh, no Hans!" Tina smiled at the growler now. "I was only joking with our friend—what is your name, Alex Bergstrom?—with Accordion Alex. The madam wants him to play in her dance hall. But, Alex, you will come and play for me some time, even if you do go fishing? You will come and dance with me in Astor Street?"

"*Jah*. Sure," said Alex.

The steamboat drifted slowly into the dark harbor, swinging on a crooked trail among the lights that hung from the dim masts of anchored ships. The fire died out of Alex's blood as the boat docked.

He felt a chill about his middle again. Here he was, at the end of the long journey. Here he was, and it was to be a long stay. Norway was far beyond all of America and the Atlantic. As he crowded with the other passengers, his gaze roved through the darkness for a sight of some one who would look like Uncle Eric. There he was, coming for him. Alex felt pretty good again, as a huge rough hand gripped his own.

"Good-by, Accordion Alex." Small fingers touched his arm. "I'll look for you on Astor Street."

"So you got acquainted with Tina on the boat," said Uncle Eric. "Watch out, Alex. That kind don't help a fisherman save money."

Alex proudly told the story of his musical triumph.

"*Nei*, playing the accordion on Astor Street is no good for a fisherman. That is for the dance hall girls and their men."

The two big Norwegians were striding over a boardwalk now. Eric Bergstrom pointed up a plank paved street as they crossed it. Shouts, music, singing and laughter sounded up and down the street, and under the scanty lights groups of men were passing from one place to another. In front of one big house a band was playing, and Alex saw girls wearing circus skirts.

"A bad place," said Eric Bergstrom. "This Astor Street is called 'Swilltown' by good people. There are better places for fishermen to drink in, when the tide turns from the ebb to the flood and we come ashore. Stay away from Astor Street and that Tina, or you will never get back to the old country with a fortune."

Alex said nothing, but he wanted very much to explore Astor Street.

He kept this wish to himself, however, as he made the long walk with his uncle to Upper Town, where the Norwegian fishermen lived. He asked questions about fishing for the royal chinook. He answered many questions about how he had left everything in the old country. And he answered the questions all over

again when he had finished the tremendous supper that Truda Bergstrom had cooked for him; and he sat with his uncle's family around a big iron heater and sipped hot rum.

He answered questions, and marveled at the fine furnishings of this home and at the American talk of Pete and Charley, his two young cousins. Fishermen certainly did much better here than in the old country. Alex decided that he would be only a fisherman and forget about playing the accordion in Madam Rosa's dance hall. But Tina's blue eyes were haunting him that night when he went to sleep.

IV

THE NEXT morning he and his uncle at once fell to work, getting the fishing gear and the sailboat ready for the salmon run. It was May's first morning, and the sun shone in a clear sky. A salty breeze blew in over the river's mouth. It carried, also, a scent of the green timber on the hills.

There were docks all along the banks, and nets were spread over the racks. The cottages and the stores were built on piling, and there was a private boat landing at nearly every one. Everywhere the fishermen were preparing for the season, which would last from May until the end of August. On and along the cannery wharves in the central section of Astoria men were at work with nets and on the water.

Austrian and Italian fishermen were flocking into the port from California steamers. Over the hill in Uniontown the Finn fishermen were preparing for the season. And the saloonkeepers, the gamblers and the dancing girls of Astor Street were making ready to gather in their large share of the gold brought by big catches of the royal chinook. It was a scene of frontier labor.

Eric Bergstrom's boat had been used only two seasons. It was twenty-six feet long and as good a sailer as a broad beamed boat could be. His two nets were new this season—the net with the

small meshes used for the small salmon which ran in the first part of the season, and the big net which was used for the great fish of the late summer. The nets were woven from pure flax, and they cost considerable money. Eric Bergstrom was the captain of the craft, and Alex was the boat puller. In the labor and excitement of the first fishing days he forgot Helga and the old country, Tina, the dance hall girl and Astor Street.

When the tide turned from the flood, a thousand sails marched out into the river from the Astoria wharves. In sunlight or starlight, in wind or fog, it was all the same—fish through the ebb tide, a hard wind knocking the boat through splashing whitecaps or a calm making the boat puller sweat and strain for hours at the oars; the flaxen meshes of the net combing a course down the great river, catching the small May salmon by the gills, catching driftwood and other river debris also.

On the upper river and in the harbor waters the river boats were a great danger in darkness and fog. They would sweep suddenly out of dense black or gray shadows and churn into the fishing fleet, smashing boats often enough, the paddle-wheel ripping nets into shreds, leaving overturned boats in their wakes, and men, burdened with oilskins and hip boots, struggling in fog, or night blanketed water. Alex Bergstrom was to know the terror of this experience before his fishing days were over.

And there were the thundering breakers of the bar. There were no big boats in the estuary, except tugs and the ships that were making or leaving port. But in his first month of fishing, Alex and his uncle had a narrow escape from the deadly breakers. They had fished down an ebb tide in a fog that was so thick a man could cut chunks out of it with an oar, as Eric Bergstrom complained. But the catch was not so bad, and they fished on, waiting for the flood.

All of a sudden the fog thinned out, and an ominous mournful roar sounded ahead. The wet sail began to smack,

as a breeze struck it. In a moment the fishing boat was out in clear sunlight. Behind the fishermen was a wall of fog that seemed to tower to the sky. Ahead, sunlight shimmered on the rollers that heaved over the bar of the great river.

Eric hauled in the net, and Alex put the boat about and fought the tide desperately with the oars. With the help of the breeze, he held his own until the tide turned. Alex was sighing with exhaustion by the time the boat had slipped back into the fog and safety. But it was another five minutes before he would let his uncle take the oars.

As the two drank hot rum at Larsen's bar Alex could not help boast and swagger a little. He was a fisherman and the son of a fisherman, a man of muscle who could lord it through wind and water. *Jah*, he had been a great fool ever to think of being a woman's man. A musicmaker in a dance hall! This was a man's life, the life he was made for, he thought exultantly, as the hot drink flushed him with a caressing warmth. The wet black oilskin glistened on mighty shoulders. In the hip boots his legs were like two tough timbers. His arms ached, but they had beaten the wind and tide. And the catch was large. *Hei* for a fisherman's life!

Eric Bergstrom said nothing about the adventure. He hadn't liked it. Such danger was miserable to go through; but it was part of the day's work. A fisherman must never be surprised if he finds himself helplessly drowning. He must think of nothing but the catch.

One evening the fleet put out from the wharves in a hard May blow. Eric's boat was beating along at a good clip, the whitecaps splashing him and Alex at every lusty puff of wind. Alex saw a boat overturn behind them.

"Leave them go," ordered Eric. "They are Italians. Their countrymen can pick them up."

The boat sailed on, stopping for nothing, until the salmon catch of this ebb tide was made.

By June Alex was feeling nothing and

thinking of nothing but the grinding labor of the fishing season. It wore a man down to skin and bone, this business. Six or seven hours of fishing; then maybe four hours of sleep; then out on the river again. Seven days a week of it. The salmon never stopped for holidays or sleep. They were strange and wonderful fish, these salmon. When they started from the open seas for the spawning grounds, where they themselves had been hatched, nothing but nets could stop them.

On up the great river. On through the falls and cascades, fighting the rapids, bruising themselves against the rocks, never feeding, always rushing on, on into the mountain rivers, into creeks, their flesh vanishing, their gills turning white, on to the grounds where they would spawn and die. A mighty fish, and sweet and rich to eat, when it came from the salt sea water.

The salmon rested not, and neither did the fishermen rest, except to snatch a little sleep. Some days the return to the cannery wharves was glorious, with five hundred pounds of salmon to throw on the scales. And there were heartbreaking days when their labor brought them no more than a dozen ten-pounders.

To Alex Bergstrom the old country—his people, Helga, the fiords, the snow crested and cloud wreathed mountains—became a dream. And it was so with his steamboat ride down the river. He almost forgot the blue eyes of Tina, the dance hall girl. Eric kept him away from Astor Street. Occasionally Alex heard talk of the logging camps and sawmills, but he paid little attention to what was said. No tunes sounded from his accordion.

Alex could spare hardly a waking moment for anything but the salmon catch. Like the other fishermen, he drank before he went out and when he came back. Often Eric took a bottle along. A nip of something strong and warm made a man feel better in the wind and fog. When he rolled into his bed Alex was like a dead man, until Aunt Truda shook him awake.

The big salmon joined the run. Fishermen boasted of netting sixty-pounders. There were glorious warm summer days and moonlit nights. Fishing was still hard labor in such fair weather, but it was more like sport. The harbor and the port were beautiful to see, then, from the fishing course. The wharves and the business streets seemed to snuggle against Coxcomb Hill, which towered six hundred feet above the river front.

The gentry had fine houses among the cedars and Douglas firs on that hill. And a man could enjoy the sight of the white river steamboats sweeping around Tongue Point. Many sailing vessels were towed over the bar and, at times, there was a little forest of masts above the wharves. Smoke from sawmill and cannery stacks waved away in lazy clouds that appeared very handsome against the blue sky.

On a clear summer day it was a fine sight at sunset, when the thousand sails of the fishing boats marched out into the river, all of them shining in a red flush of light. At such a time a young fisherman could not feel very heroic, but he could feel contented. He was storing up wealth. Life in this American country seemed pretty good.

V

AT THE end of the salmon run in the last of August Alex Bergstrom had seven hundred dollars as his share of the season's catch. It was a large sum for any workingman to possess at that time, and it appeared like fabulous wealth to Alex Bergstrom, the youth from Norway.

The end of the season had left him with a great weariness. He was gaunt and worn. For a week he did little but eat and sleep. Then his thoughts turned again to the slim girl, Tina, and to the pleasures of Astor Street. Surely he could enjoy a little fun now, with such a store of wealth.

"You watch yourself, Alex," admonished Eric. "It is eight months until the next season. You had better do like the

other smart fishermen; buy some land, build yourself a house. You keep away from Swilltown, Alex. There your money will go like minnows through the net. Build a house and write about America to your Helga."

Alex did scrawl a letter to Helga. He told her he had become rich in one summer in America. He was going to stay in the wonderful country. He was going to build a house. *Jah*, a fine house. It would have three rooms. There would be two stoves and fine furniture.

"A big bed fit for a king and a queen. What do you think of that, Helga?"

But there were so many lots for sale; and, before Alex could decide on one, he had strayed to Astor Street. He got down there one night with three young fishermen who could talk American. They told a bartender that they were "out for gude time an' raise hal." The bartender was sympathetic; he treated. Each of the four fishermen then bought a round of whisky. After that Alex could not resist the music that sounded from Madam Rosa's dance hall.

"At last, here is Accordion Alex!" cried Tina, as soon as he had entered the door.

She left her partner and danced up to him. Alex frowned at the paint on her face. He no longer imagined that she might be a good girl, but he was still charmed by the yellow waves of her hair and the light of her blue eyes.

"Do you hear the accordions?" she laughed. "You can play much better. Let's see how you dance, Alex. Come, an old country dance."

Alex looked awkward in his store clothes, but when he swung Tina among the dancers his strength and grace triumphed over machine-made coat and trousers. His long blond hair waved and shone. He had the clear eyes of youth, the pink cheeks, the white teeth and the irresistible smile. His big shoulders swayed rhythmically with the motions of his lean, limber body. His feet seemed hardly to touch the floor, as he romped through the dance.

"How strong he is!" panted Tina,

when the dance was done. "You will dance with me again, Alex?"

"*Jah*. Sure," he grinned.

But there were so many drinks, that his friends had to help him home. Alex felt pretty sick, when he got up at noon, but he was greatly relieved when neither his uncle nor his aunt reproached him. They had expected it. Most of the young unmarried fishermen wasted their earnings. Well, it was a hard life, and a lusty young fellow could not sit and suck his thumb like a baby. If he had really wanted Helga, he might have built a house.

Alex still insisted to himself that he wanted Helga. She was a good girl and would make a good wife. This other—*heil*! She was a bad one. But Astor Street, well, they could call it Swilltown, but it had beauty, laughter, music and light, shining bars and glittering mirrors, jolly people. Down there men who wore diamonds would treat you as a friend. Alex had a feeling for more than a riot of drinking. Astor Street made dreams seem true. A fisherman never knew whether he would last through another season. Down in the river bottom drowned, with crabs gnawing your eyes—what were savings then? *Hei* for Astor Street

By Christmas little was left of Alex's seven hundred dollars. The other young fishermen who had enjoyed their earnings had to run up bills at the stores and boarding houses to live. There was little other work to be had. Besides, a real fisherman despised other kinds of work. But Alex Bergstrom could play the accordion. And Tina wanted him. So he began playing in Madam Rosa's dance hall.

His playing and singing soon made him known among the Norwegians and Finns of the port. They seemed to admire him, but Alex felt that they esteemed him the less for his good fortune. Uncle Eric hardly talked to him any more. If it hadn't been for Tina, he would have left the dance hall and gone into debt for his living, like the other young fishermen.

Then Alex got a letter from Helga. He was astonished to find so many expressions of faith in it. He had forgotten, almost, that they had ever been in love. She said she was wild with delight about the house; she wrote as if she expected him to send for her next spring, and put her in the fine new house as his wife. What a scrape you can get into, thought Alex, just by writing a letter. Yet, it seemed that it would have been the best thing that could have happened, had he bought a lot, built a house and sent for Helga to be his wife.

He had been a devil of a fool. This Tina had made him crazy. She had made him half promise not to go fishing any more. Well! A fisherman was a man. An accordion player was a womanly thing. From now on he would be a fisherman, nothing else. Next autumn he would build a house for Helga. She was a good girl, who didn't wear paint on her face.

VI

THAT night Alex got very drunk before he went to Madam Rosa's dance hall. Intoxication, instead of weakening his resolution to be just a fisherman hereafter, increased it to a moral passion. He preached a sermon into the unwilling ears of Tina. At the end of it Alex solemnly admonished her, advised her to wipe the paint off her face and quit the life of a dance hall girl. Tina's blue eyes turned steely. She slapped him, then raked his cheek with her nails.

It happened that Crooked Mouth Scotty and a gang of bullteam loggers were in the dance hall, all of them drunk enough to be spoiling for a fight. Scotty saw the quarrel between Alex and Tina and he pushed through the dancers to take her part.

A smash behind the right ear knocked Alex over a table. He straightened up with a bellow of rage that was the signal for a knock down and drag out fight to start between the fishermen and the loggers. Scotty's fist hit Alex on the

chin, like a hammer. He pitched backward from the blow, the back of his neck hitting the floor first. Crooked Mouth Scotty dropped on top of him, felled by Tina, who had broken a full bottle of beer over his head. Blood from Scotty's cut scalp streamed into Alex's eyes.

He heard Scandinavian and American oaths roaring, glass smashing and the shrieks of the dance hall girls. He rolled Scotty away and attempted to get to his feet. He saw a couple of gamblers throw themselves, bellies down, on the floor and wrap their arms around their faces. Two British sailors staggered through the door and stared boozily at the row. A fisherman floored one and a logger kicked the other off his feet. The lights were knocked out.

The battlers rioted into the street, Alex going dizzily with the rest. Somehow, the fight ended, the loggers and the fishermen straggling into other dance halls and saloons, where they inspected black eyes and cut lips and laughed hilariously over the battle. But Alex started for home. Tina ran out in front of him.

"Oh, Alex, don't go!" she cried. "I'm sorry I scratched you. Come back and be friends again, Alex!"

"Go back to your woodsman," he growled, not knowing that she had felled that same woodsman. "I have been a devil of a fool about you. You are a bad one. I have a good girl in the old country."

He pushed her away and dragged himself home. He felt very sick of Astor Street. But he was back there again in a week. It seemed like he had to go. Every place else was so dull in the rainy winter weather. It was hard to just loaf around and listen to talk about fishing. Astor Street had dreams for a man. But now Tina had left. Madam Rosa didn't know where she had gone. Maybe to San Francisco, maybe just to Portland.

He didn't care, Alex told himself. He would be a sober man from now on. At the end of the next season he would build a house and send for Helga. *Jah*, he would do better this year. He'd become

a real salmon fisherman, have his own house and his own boat and fishing gear.

There were dreary days, until the river came to life in another May. Then the battle with wind, fog and tide claimed everything. For another four months Alex gave the labor of fishing all that he had. He drank more this season between ebb tides. It seemed that he had to. It was a nightmare out there on the river, when the wind and fog were bad. The life ground more out of Alex than it did out of a stolid man like Uncle Eric. He always had to fight down something in himself that revolted against it. Something made him dream, and the river was a devil in his dreams. But he fought that devil with all his might. *Hei*, he was a man!

It was a bitter fight—and there was always Astor Street. And Astor Street caught Alex again at the end of this season in its glittering web. He was a fisherman in debt when another May shone. The story repeated itself.

"Ah, he's a wild one, that Alex," his uncle would say, shaking his head.

But there was some pride in his eyes. Alex had proved himself a man. He had stuck to the fishing. He was a first rate fisherman, and not an accordion player in a dance hall. He did not go off longshoring or working in the woods. He was a man of one trade, a fisherman on the frontier. He helped to make up the life that sent a thousand sails out from the port in the season, and he helped to make the roaring colorful life of Astor Street.

Helga's letters came no more, after Alex's fifth season on the Columbia River. His mother wrote that she had married. The news came at the end of the season, and Alex spent his earnings in a tremendous spree that lasted one month and carried him to Portland and back again to Astoria.

Eric Bergstrom said nothing to Alex. But he told his wife not to worry, that the wild young fisherman was a Bergstrom and would settle down some time. He was a good boat puller. Let him go as he

listed, until the oldest boy was big enough to take his place. There was time enough for Alex to settle down and buy his own boat and fishing gear.

VII

ERIC BERGSTROM'S stolidity was not disturbed by the terrible accident that befell Alex. *Jah*, it was dangerous, this life of fishing on the river. He himself didn't fear, for he kept sober and knew how to take care of himself on the river. Alex had been drunk that day, or such a little bump wouldn't have thrown him out of the boat. The steamer had jumped out of the fog all of a sudden, but it hadn't hit them such a hard bump.

If Alex hadn't stood up and shaken his oar at the boat, calling it a river devil, swearing like a madman—*jah*, he was crazy drunk, had been raising hell on Astor Street, when he should have been getting sleep.

So he pitched over the side. And the paddlewheel had smashed his leg. The doctor had to cut it off above the knee. With only one leg a fisherman was no good. A half of a man. *Jah*, he and Truda would have to take care of Alex.

Alex was in bed for many weeks. He became thin and pale, but it wasn't only the throbbing stump of a leg that made him suffer so much. He was beaten. The river had beaten him, made him half a man. He could never go out with the salmon fleet again. He was no good any more. Good for nothing but dreams.

Alex would twist his head and look at the sweep of a broad shoulder and a thick arm until his eyes burned. Drawing a deep breath, he would watch the bulk of his chest lift. Alex would feel a tight ache in his throat then. The river had beaten him. He was no good. Good for nothing but dreams. No better than a hunchback. Half a man.

While he was learning to hobble about on a wooden leg, Alex brought out the old accordion. He sat in a rocking chair, shut his eyes and made it croon many tunes. Strange, thought Aunt Truda, so

few of them were old country tunes. Most of them were new to her. Alex had learned them in the dance halls. Well, he was not thinking of the old country, as he played.

Closing his eyes and playing the accordion, he could shut out the nightmare of the river and forget the river's triumph. He saw himself in the dance hall, a swaggering young fisherman, flush with the money from a tremendous catch, a broad beamed, yellow headed giant in oilskins, with legs as solid as two timbers, in shiny hip boots. There wasn't a better fisherman on the river than that young Alex Bergstrom at Madam Rosa's bar.

The dance hall girls were all crazy about him, especially one with clear blue eyes and wavy yellow hair. *Jah*, Tina was certainly there. She didn't want him to be an accordion player any more. He was her big fisherman. They waltzed. How lightly he waltzed, even in heavy boots! *Heil* Here was the best pair of legs, the lightest feet on the river! Tina's eyes were misty with love.

"Is he losing his mind?" said Aunt Truda to Eric. "He plays waltzes the day long."

"I think he is practising to play in the dance halls," said Eric.

That was the logic of it. By the end of the winter Alex Bergstrom, fisherman, was forgotten. But Accordion Alex was known to everybody in the port.

Sailors off the ocean ships, steamboat men, loggers from the bullteam camps, clamdiggers, sailmakers, boat builders and the thousands of fishermen in the port—all of them came to Madam Rosa's place at some time or another to hear Accordion Alex play. There were four others, making an accordion band. And there was a drummer.

But when Accordion Alex shut his eyes and played—that was the music. Sometimes he would sing. Then the dancing would stop. The dancing girls and the frontier laborers would try to make him drink more, for he would sing only when he was drunk.

Accordion Alex was a famous man, but

when he looked on the dancing crowd with sober eyes he was sad. *Nei*, it was not a man's life, this. They were men, out there in the crowd with the dancing girls, many of them in their work clothes. They were here for a few hours of freedom, here for a short escape from the grinding chains of labor. That labor was their real life—on ship, in the timber or on the river. The crowd changed every night. Most of the time the men were at work, as men should be. They were lean about the middle, and you could see that their arms were hard.

His own arms were getting flabby, and his body was fat and soft. He was an accordion player, a woman's man. He was a dance hall fisherman. Well, it couldn't be helped. When you were half a man, you had to live like one. Any one could see that. It made you sad, even when you were playing your liveliest, and the crowd was yelling cheers at you. So you would drink until you got a hot glow in your head. Then you could shut your eyes and dream as you played.

Dream you were such a lusty and handsome young fisherman that any girl must love you madly! Such a man could sing with fire in his voice. And so Accordion Alex sang to Madam Rosa's crowd. Some nights, the dream was cold and dim, and Accordion Alex would drink too much. He would have to be helped up to his room—he stayed with his uncle and aunt no longer—for a peg-legged man falls down easily when he is drunk. Usually he would fight with the ones who tried to help him, growling in Norwegian that he could get to bed by himself, even if he was half a man.

In spite of his heavy drinking, Accordion Alex lasted for three seasons in Madam Rosa's dance hall. In time he lost much of his magic. When he shut his eyes and dreamed, things blurred up in a devilish confusion. The dance hall floor would change to fog blanketed water; the mighty young fisherman was shaking his fist at a squat snorting devil that beat him down, smothered him, mastered him. *Jah*, the river had taken the man. But

Accordion Alex played on. He could play the accordion in his sleep.

Tina was confused in his mind with the girl, Helga. He saw a girl in the old country's long skirted dress, a girl with braids and clean cheeks. But she was Tina. He stood in front of her and fought back a mob. He was always fighting now, in the blur of dreams. Labor was a battle; so was love. He had been beaten by the river. He told the fishermen that they should be proud, for they hadn't been beaten yet. They laughed and told him that he was cracked—and to quit talking and sing them a song.

"Jah. Sure."

He sang well, as long as he saw the girl in Helga's dress among the blur of faces and light, but he could not hold the fancy. He was a crippled clown, paid to amuse carousing laborers. The singing and playing was work, miserable work that he must do, because he was only half a man. There was no hope for him, if he could not dream. The next night the dream would return, and he would see Tina in the crowd—with Alex Bergstrom, the young fisherman, by her side.

Then Tina herself returned. Accordion Alex saw her, not in a blur of faces and light, not in the dress of a Helga, not innocent and young, but as she was, changed as he himself had changed. Accordion Alex knew her at once, however, and he was not surprised.

She was on the arm of a Portland saloonkeeper. The man was fat. He wore a glossy black mustache, and a huge diamond sparkled in his necktie. Tina was dressed in rich silks. She was slim as ever, and her yellow hair was still wavy and thick. Her eyes smiled, as they had always smiled. She and the saloonkeeper had a drink and a little talk with Madam Rosa. Then Tina came over and greeted Accordion Alex. She chatted very pleasantly.

She had heard about his success as an accordion player. He was famous as far as Portland. She was kind in her manner, but very superior. Wouldn't he play something for her?

"Jah. Sure."

Tina and her saloonkeeper danced one dance. Then Tina shook hands with Accordion Alex and said she hoped to hear him again some time. He kept his eyes shut as long as he heard her silks rustling toward the door.

VIII

ACCORDION ALEX didn't drink or play any more that night. He was sober as a judge when he hobbled up to his room. He lay awake all that night, trying to think. But no thought would come to him; nor any feeling, either, except an aching sense of loss, a faint shadow of the pain he had known when the river had beaten him. Now he was beaten again.

He would get out, go to the Puget Sound country, maybe. It didn't matter. A flame had gone out. A dream had died. And now there was nothing. He was a shell, a burned out lamp. *Nei, nei*, nothing left but the living of years. Just to get away and settle down at something or other. That was all he could think about.

The old-timers in Astoria say that Accordion Alex disappeared.

Dropped out of sight, like so many of the old characters. He was a little cracked, because he didn't want to play the accordion in a dance hall. He wanted to fish, to battle the old devil of a river. Wouldn't you say he was cracked, now?"

French M. P.'s

By STEAMER

THE French military police were taken from the Gendarmerie Nationale and were not chosen by hit or miss methods as was the case in the American Army. In the A. E. F. each replacement camp furnished its own police and isolated detachments furnished theirs. Sometimes the ammunition train of a division was detailed as police, sometimes the medical units. Often the police of an area would be furnished by a regiment of cavalry, the only similarity between all these systems being that the policing was poorly done and the police were thoroughly hated by the Yanks.

The Gendarmerie Nationale is essentially a military body. It is divided into three parts, the Gendarmerie Departementale, the body that serves in France, the Gendarmerie Maritime, who serve in the military ports, and the Gendarmerie d'Afrique, although the latter is com-

posed of one legion only, the Nineteenth.

Each one of these divisions is separated into legions, and the legions are allotted to each military region or corps area according to its importance. Four regions have two, and the other, the one about Paris, three. During peace times the Gendarmerie performs the same duties as those of State police in this country, but during war times the legions operate with their respective corps, performing the duties of military police, provost guard, prisoner guard, traffic control, etc.

The members of the Gendarmerie are recruited from reenlisted noncommissioned officers only. Those accompanying the army in the field all hold the grade of *maréchal de logis*, or sergeant, and wear above the diagonal chevron a tiny gold bar that signifies the reenlisted man. This mark is called a "*galon d'imbécile*" by the French.

Whiskers Beck gets himself taken as an outlaw

THE BELLS OF SAN JUAN

By Alan LeMay *Author of "Painted Ponies"*



WHISKERS' BECK'S fan-like spread of white beard was damp and dragged; above it his mustache stuck out in disgruntled wisps, like the fur of a drying cat. He ran a blue bandanna over his bald head, and his tired hand fell away lackadaisically, leaving the handkerchief perched there in a soggy wad.

From their bench by the bunkhouse door the Triangle R cowpunchers gazed across the broad Wyoming prairie, steaming from its fresh rain; the vapor floated thinly, close to the ground, obscuring the feet of the far mountains. It had been a welcome rain, like a last farewell of the spring that had but a little while ago lost itself in dry heat. It would put fresh power into the grass, add many a hundred-weight of flesh to the Triangle R herds.

But to Whiskers Beck the downpour had been a vicissitude. He had ridden all day, chilled, coatless, dripping in rivulets. By the time he reached the main ranch again a new leak in the roof had seen to it that he had no dry clothes to put on.

Now he sat drying, slowly, and thinking of better things. From out in the horse shelter the wheeze of an accordion came through the dusk, accompanying a thin song.

"The bells of St. Mary's er callin', er callin',
The bells of Saint Mary's, tiddly um tum to me—"

The accordion's wail suited Whiskers' mood. His mind was turning to younger things; to a place mildly warm, where the song of bells really rang over a far dry land. In the smoke of his cigaret he could see a white plain, still sending up heat

waves in elusive rainbow shimmerings, even in the twilight.

. . . A placid expanse of water is held by a dam at the bend of the Pipestone River. Sedges, grass and willows grow lush at its edge, long after the rest of the land is sere. By the bright water sit the flat roofed little houses of San Juan, their blue and pink and yellow 'dobe reflected so clearly that it seems other houses are hanging head downward in limpid depths. The little plaza they enclose is shaded by four or five big trees; their twisted arms rise protectively over the tiny town. There is a well in the plaza, its deep waters crystalline and cool. And in the laze of evening the smell of cooking drifts through the village, the steaming aroma of *frijoles con carne*, and *chili's* tantalizing pungence . . .

"I don't know what I'm goin' t'do with 'Tar'ble Joe'," said "Dixie" Kane, "if he don't leave off passin' out that cold salt jackfish. Here we come in all holler an' soaked, an' what loud smell brings us up standin'? Damn dead fish again, an' not even warm. I never see such a thing in a cow country. I know the Old Man bought that jackfish cheap an' it's like to spoil, but—"

Whiskers winced and let the sentences drift meaningless past his ears.

. . . At one side of the plaza stands the ancient mission of San Juan. Its adobe is falling away, revealing the deep maroon of its mortar, the venerable gray of its stone. Its arches are weathered, seasoned, more beautiful with the years. What lost fragment of a Penitente religion is surviving here? Who are the dark faced, black robed monks? What are the words of their chanted prayers? A man doesn't recall.

At evening the bells of the mission peal in mellow tones; there are only six of them in the squat bell tower, but the man who plays them from deep within the stone makes them seem like many more. Some of the chimes are not in key; there is a wild plaintiveness in the songs they sing, a tale of something not quite complete. As if they bear kinship to Indian water-

drums, Navajo robes at once vivid and subdued, and such almost forgotten things. Sweet bells though, sweet in the evening twilight . . .

"Gosh," said Dixie, "y'oughter see the swell mud in the corral. Tomorrer, if yuh see bubbles comin' up to the top, sink a rope down—it's me lookin' fer m' horse. I hope it rains all week."

"Amen," said "Whack-Ear" heartily. "Drizzle, drazzle, squunch, squunch, squunch—ain't that music?"

Whiskers, with great effort, dragged himself out of Whack-Ear's imaginary mud. He turned his ears to the accordion, and his mind to far off San Juan.

. . . In the evening, under the trees in the plaza, dark-eyed girls stroll arm in arm; and youths in bright *serapes*, their conical, wide-brimmed hats cocked jauntily, lounge here and there with their cigarets and watch the girls. A man doesn't remember it all. What were the winged things that lived in the tower with the bells—bats, or owls—or something else? And what were the odd, big-billed birds that nested in the plaza, sending strident bugle tones through the midday heat?

There is life, and love, and color in San Juan, to say nothing of the cooking of Madrecito Pasqual. But these things are only decorations for a place of warm peace, where an old man can sit and smoke and rest his rope gnarled hands . . . Mornings, no crawling out of bed into the cold dark, no labor stretching ahead to the day's end. Evenings, a chair against a hut by the plaza, a smell of hot food and the song of the vesper bells. They only work when they feel like it, in San Juan . . .

A banjo with a tin head, a set of tin-ware drums and four galvanized voices suddenly burst into self-expression at Whiskers' elbow:

"Ching lang ling, ching lang ling,
' Ching la dee dee!

Sweet were the words that she hollered at me!
Ching lang ling—"

"Holy murder!" Whiskers moaned. Slowly he went inside, where he pulled

damp blankets over his aching head. "What I need is a vacation," he told himself. "And by God I'm goin' to take it!"

South, southwest by the clicking rails, south to the *casitas* of San Juan. . .

FOR AN hour and a half the little tin car had jounced its way along twisting ruts in a glare of sun; but as Whiskers stepped stiffly to the ground the sun suddenly completed its drop behind the ranges, and earth and grass merged into a barren of felt as gray as his dust matted beard.

He should have arrived at San Juan earlier, but because of an inaccuracy in his railroad map Whiskers had got off fifteen miles too soon. Since no more trains were due, he had had to travel twenty-four miles by flivver, instead of the eight miles expected.

For a little while he stood there in the dust beside his telescope valise.

At the end of a full minute he said, "Can this be— Oh, I guesso." After two minutes he said, "Seems like I must 'a' kind o' fergot this here smell o' sheep. Mebbe it won't seem so plumb outstandin', come mornin'," A little later he squared his shoulders. There was a slightly pained expression about his eyes, but a fine flourish in his voice as he told himself, "Well, gosh—it's great to be back!"

A stir of excitement was animating the figures that lounged against the huts facing the square. They drew together into groups, they jabbered in hushed voices, covertly gesticulating. A ragged youth with a puffy brown face was approaching timorously. Through the Mexican's straggling forelock Whiskers discerned the glint of terror.

"I got a big notion to make a face at him," said Whiskers to himself, "jest to see him leave his clo'es behind in one clean jump."

"Ah, *buenos tardes, señor capitán*," the youth quavered huskily. He continued in Spanish, "All is in readiness."

"What?" snapped Whiskers. The dark

youth quailed, then turned and ran bow-leggedly.

"Stop!" Whiskers yelled. The young man stopped. "Come back here!" He came creeping back. The groups before the colorless 'dobe shacks had grown swiftly; probably every one in the village was watching.

"Take this valise!" He now took to his half-forgotten Spanish. "Take it to the house of Madrecito Pasqual. No! *Pasqual*. PASQUAL! P-a-s-k-o-l, Pasqual!"

The valise flopped into the dust again, and bony hands spread deprecatingly. A torrent of frightened Spanish slithered forth. What *el capitán* asked was impossible, Whiskers was told. La Madre Pasqual was dead. Her old man was dead. Her sons were either hanged or run away. Her house was now the jail. He would be only too glad to see *el capitán* comfortable in it, but it was occupied already. But if only *el capitán*—

Whiskers Beck silenced the outpouring with difficulty.

"Oh, all right," he conceded, "take me somewheres else."

With something like a sob of relief the youth snatched up the canvas valise and trotted ahead, his bare feet flapping in the dust.

Had he been less travel weary Beck would have swaggered. Seldom had he attracted more awestruck attention. As he followed the peon past the huts on one side of the plaza the inhabitants ahead of him withdrew into doorways, oozed around the corners of walls; he could feel eyes peering at him from windows and doorways ostentatiously vacant. Glancing over his shoulder, he could see the people timorously coming out of hiding to stare at his retreating back.

He whirled in his tracks, and the nearest reappearing group scuttled into hiding again.

"Anyway," said Whiskers, "they know who's boss around here!"

They entered the largest of the 'dobe houses, and for a moment Beck could see nothing in the windowless dark. There was a close smell of sweat drenched

clothes baked by the dry heat, a chicken-coop odor from a corner where fighting cocks must have lived for years and a smell of weak mutton stew that suggested boiled wool.

Whiskers gasped for air.

"'Sawful funny how a man fergets smells."

A baggy old woman was before him, bowing and making conciliating gestures; she mouthed bad Spanish with toothless gums.

"Give me a drink," he ordered.

A tin can was handed to him, and he raised it eagerly to his lips. Into his mouth flowed a lukewarm semi-liquid, too thick for water, too thin for mud; it tasted of pond slime and rusty tin. He spat the stuff upon the earthen floor, threw down the can and booted it into the plaza. The peon who had carried Whiskers' valise leaped for the door and fled. The baggy old woman's apologies became tumultuous, profuse; it was evident that she had no other drink to offer, and Whiskers felt ashamed. Silently he went out in search of a saloon.

THE CLEAR, lasting light of evening lay coolly on San Juan, revealing none too kindly the hardships worked upon it by careless living. But Whiskers, made angry by his thirst, saw nothing but the thing he sought—San Juan's only bar. "Pulqueria," its scaling sign advertised it; and Whiskers strode toward it across the plaza.

As he pushed into the room's fetid heat the reek of raw alcohol, supported by the peculiarly characteristic odors of Mexican liquors, for a moment gave him pause. He scowled redly about the room, fixing a stare of malevolence on each of its dozen patrons in turn. Then his silver rang on the bar.

"Best in the house!"

The white aguardiente whisky scorched its way down his throat, bringing tears to his eyes and starting a small bonfire in his empty middle.

"Gimme another."

He drank a second and a third; then

as he turned to look about him, he discovered that the saloon was empty. At a little square window in the rear mud wall he could see four or five staring heads silhouetted against the evening sky. They immediately withdrew.

"Well, wha-at the hell here?" Whiskers wondered. For the first time he began to notice something odd about his reception in San Juan. He pushed out into the better air of the plaza.

Sauntering, he began a general reconnaissance of this place to which he had chosen to come. And as he checked over one after another of the things that had changed, a heavy mood of gloom descended over him with the lowering dusk.

. . . For San Juan, somehow, has shrunk. It is only a straggling handful of 'dobe shanties, now; and the dusty sterility of the burnt desert has crept in. The gay pinks and blues and creams are gone from the walls of the huts, scoured and blasted to the color of dust by sirocco lashed sand. The plaza, too, has shrunk in the heat of the years until it is only a sort of dusty yard, a place to throw tin cans, bottles and old rags.

Three of the four trees in the plaza are dead; only broken claws remain of their great, foliaged arms. On the last living tree two or three limbs still bear a few handfuls of dusty leaves; the rest are sere. How small and twisted those trees seem, now that they are broken and forlorn! And the big billed, piping bugle-birds are gone.

Beneath the broken trees the clear-water well is filled up, disused. A heap of garbage marks the spot where it used to be . . .

Whiskers Beck pressed forward, feeling the urgent need of resting his eyes upon the coolly placid waters of the Pipestone.

At first he couldn't find the Pipestone at all. There was, indeed, the dusty bed where it had been, but it seemed that even the Pipestone was now "running upside down." Then, walking along the powdery bank, he came upon all that was left of that bright expanse of water.

. . . The dam is broken, washed

away in freshets long ago. A few snaggy teeth of drunken stakes, garnished with driftwood, are all that remain. Left unsupported, the broad pond has shrunk to a reeking puddle thick as gumbo. There is still green stuff growing about it—green, that is, in comparison to the parched plains cactus; it grows rank in the weltering mud.

From this stagnant mud hole the peons scoop the dull water that they drink. It is wet enough, at least, to breed mosquitoes in swarms and clouds . . .

"Fer God's sake," said Whiskers Beck. "You could knock me over with a medium sized ax!"

Scratching his mosquito bites, Whiskers made his way back into the plaza in search of the ancient mission. As he turned the corner of a hut a ragged, pot-bellied child started up, stared at him and fled screaming. Beck stopped to scratch his head.

"They's a strap broke somewheres," he told himself. "They must think I've got some disgustin' disease."

Once more as he strolled before the huts the lounging groups melted away at his approach, to form again, staring, when he had passed. It was beginning to get on Whiskers' nerves.

"Got a mind to make a feint at 'em," he grumbled, "an' have the town plumb to myself."

THE LITTLE stone building that housed the mission has crumbled away. Its arches are broken, scourged by the sand; its mysterious windows are notches in disordered stone. Its flagged floors, once worn smooth by the passing and repassing of sandaled feet, are now open to the sky, heaped with windrows of dust.

And the people—ragged, timorous, unwashed—where are the swaggering youths who once galloped in from the plain, the silver decorations tinkling on the bridles of the shaggy, fighting ponies that they rode? Where are the dark eyed girls who strolled in gay mantillas as the twilight fell beneath the trees? They were beau-

tiful then. Vanished now, or turned to squat, ugly old women, picking over garbage in the square.

And the bells—the bells are gone, as are the ringers, their tower crumbled away with the rest. Gone, gone, the mellow voiced bells and all the beautiful remembered things, the threads of a vanished dream . . .

"I ain't goin' to make no statement," Whiskers mumbled, "not tonight. Nosir, not even to myself. But I *will* say, of all the cheap, low-down swindles I ever see, that railroad ticket I bought to come here was the worst!"

He moped along, dragging his boots in the dust, toward the hut where he had left his valise.

Whiskers Beck could not afterward distinctly recall just when or how he became aware that a rifle was looking at him from a window across the plaza. But when he did realize it there was no room in his mind for doubt. Without seeming to look, he gave that window the careful scrutiny peculiar to men who think themselves likely to be shot.

The dusk was thickening rapidly; a gunny sack partly obscured that black hole in the wall across the square. No one could have been certain that anything in particular was visible there. Yet the longer Whiskers studied the opening the more certain he became that he could see part of a face, a bulge of shoulder, a dark looking something on the window ledge that was hard to account for in peaceable ways.

Every peculiarity that he had noticed in the actions of San Juan's inhabitants returned to him in a tumbling parade. The red grouch that had been growing in him now swiftly cooled.

Expecting momentarily to hear the hum of a bullet past his head, yet without quickening his pace, he reached the smelly hut to which he had first been led; hesitated for a fraction of a moment at the door as if he were going to lean against the jamb to rest; then with one quick step put the wall of the hut between himself and the rifle—if there was a rifle—

that watched him from across the open ground.

For a moment or two he stood against the hut's inner wall, accustoming his eyes to the new dark. When he had satisfied himself that he was alone he cautiously peered out around the wooden jamb. At the window which he suspected he could make out even less than before; if anything, the gunny sack had been moved to shield it a little more effectively. No light had been lit in the building in question, nor in those adjoining it; and the failing twilight gave his eyes little with which to work.

When he had stood there motionless for some little time a sharp thrill aroused him, and though he made no move his attention snapped from the window across the plaza to the darkness behind him, within the hut itself. Something had moved there, a rat, a scorpion—or a man. He had no gun, nor any other weapon, unless the folding knife in his pocket could be considered such. Motionless, he waited for the sound to recur.

It came again, the smallest sort of rustle, the faintest hint of a tread. This time he thought he detected in it a suggestion of weight, telling him that whatever had moved possessed size and mass. He waited, scarcely breathing; waited—

Suddenly Beck whirled and grabbed with both hands. His fingers closed on wrists.

Then he let go, and cursed; for the wrists were flabby and old. As he released them, that horrible baggy old woman sank to her knees on the mud floor and, reaching claw-like hands upward, plead volubly that he spare her life, if only long enough for her to get him his supper.

When at last he had got the shaking old woman to her feet, partially reassured that she was no longer in danger, Whiskers wiped the cold sweat off his forehead and demanded his valise. His remaining tobacco was in it; when he smoked again, he thought, perhaps he would be able to eat. He was furious with himself for his nervousness, for the foolish

things that the bashfulness of these people had made him imagine. Stepping to the door, he exposed himself full front to whoever might be across the square with rifle or with none; and when no shot came he mocked himself the more.

"This way, *señor el capitán*, in this room, here, is your baggage, your bed, your supper, everything. Ah, *señor*, we have done our best to make you comfortable and happy. Only walk this way, *señor*—"

The old hag was urging him to enter a black cavern of a doorway, apparently leading to an inner apartment.

"Bring a light, *señora*."

"Ah, *si si*, *señor*, only enter and make yourself comfortable. I will borrow a neighbor's light."

She shuffled out. Whiskers Beck blindly stepped through the door she had indicated into a stuffy room. He was feeling in all his pockets for his matches—

A heavy body crushed down upon his head and shoulders with such impact that the tendons of his neck cracked, and he saw an illusory flash of light. He was borne down, his feet were swept from under him and the floor rushed upward in an attempt to dash out his brains . . .

DELIBERATELY, when the first daze of impact had passed off, Whiskers took stock of his situation. He was prone on the floor, clamped there by the weight of more than one heavy man. One eye was swelling shut from contact with the hard 'dobe on which he lay, but he believed that he was otherwise unhurt. He could hear congratulatory mutterings above him; and as soon as he had made out that these were in English he decided to await quietly the development of events. Beck was past the age where men struggle violently without definite purpose in view.

A strong hand jerked one of his wrists behind him, then the other. About each of them clicked a band of steel.

"Put on the leg chains w'ile yer at it," said a wheezy voice.

"What good is—" said a second voice.

"D'yuh think I want'er get kicked in the eye?"

"Oh all right."

"What the hifalutin hell?" queried Whiskers Beck in smothered tones. "Yuh think I'm so spooky as all that?"

"We know yer all right," said the breathy voice. "I'll jest set right here in the middle of his back, Ed, till you get them leg irons on. All set? Light the light then an' shut the door."

A goodly glow of kerosene light flared up, revealing nothing to Whiskers except that the floor had not been swept lately.

"Gimme hand, Ed," the wheezy man said. "Ain't so limber as I useter be. H'ist up! Oomph! Reckon I fall jest as heavy as I ever did though."

With the weight raised from the small of his back, Whiskers twisted his neck to peer upward at the man's huge bulk.

"Hope t' see yuh fall heavier," said Beck.

"What's that?"

"I say," said Whiskers, "I never seen no one fall heavier."

"I reckon not," said the bulky one. "See if you can find his guns, Ed. Darn me if I can find even a bean blower on the cuss. Ain't that queer?"

Lean, strong hands rummaged through Beck's clothes. As they turned him over Whiskers saw they belonged to a tall young man with a thin sad face, a face whose defect was a peculiarly earnest expression.

"Don't look real bright," Whiskers decided. The other man was of bulging oval figure, with a face, Whiskers thought, suggesting a Berkshire pig of political turn of mind. He was growing bald.

"H'ist him up, Ed, on to that bench there. Let's have a look at him."

When the earnest young man had planted Whiskers as directed, the fat one arranged himself in a rickety arm chair, placed his fingertips together and contemplated the prisoner.

"Gosh, Mister Walker," said the man called Ed, "he don't look like such a tough one, does he?"

"He looks more like a man lookin' out

of a hay pile," Walker offered. He studied Beck's dust matted beard disparagingly. "But then, yuh gotta consider that those whiskers ain't his own."

"An' you," said Whiskers Beck, "look somethin' like a cross between a cook wagon an' a b'loon. Only I s'pose that four ton o' fat ain't yours neither."

"You won't get now'eres that way," said the fat man. He tapped a small nickel star that was pinned to his coatless suspenders. "His guns must be in his satchel, Ed. Crack her open."

They dragged open Beck's canvas telescope, and Ed began listing the contents in a singsong voice:

"Bunch o' old blue shirts, bunch o' old overall pants, bunch o' playin' cards with a string tied 'round, bottle rheumatiz medicine, bottle o' hair tonic, bunch o' wool sox—"

"Will that hair tonic work?" asked the fat one.

"Bunch o' underwear, bunch o' pitcher postcards, good light bridle, good pair boots, six-seven pair spurs, three apples, three an a half mouth organs, one boiled shirt—ain't clean, old rumped black necktie, two tired-out high collars, muzzle fer a dog, sewin' outfit in a candy box, gold medal fer ridin', two rat-traps—ben used, bottle wolf poison, tin thing with a pitcher on it that goes over a stovepipe hole, medjum size fryin' pan, skinnin' knife, long piece red ribbon, brush an' comb, bunch of all kinds pipes, one skin off a cat, cigaret papers, mantelpiece clock, about forty sacks bull, colored pitcher o' Niagara Falls, gob o' beeswax, bunch o' keys, couple dozen loose straps, bag o' harness buckles—I dunno what this here is—two jew's-harps, twisted-nail puzzle, shoe fer a mule, ax head, piece buckskin, mail order catalog, rattlesnake skin, string o' silver conchas, sea shell, cigar box o' nails, saddler's outfit, Injun pouch full o' buttons, china hen's egg—"

"No guns ner dynamite ner nothin'?"

"Nope. Not unless it's dynamite wrapped in this newspaper. Ain't though—it's railroad spikes. Extry hatband, whale line rope, snaffle bit, straight bit,

curb chain, Spanish spade, double curb, hinge fer a door—"

"No use goin' no further," said the fat man with the star, "the valise ain't his."

"Prob'ly stole it," Ed suggested.

"Most like. Not only that, but stole it off some pore, dodderin' old man that didn't have good sense. Look at all that worthless junk. Cat skins! Hens' eggs! Useless to anybody not foolish in the head. Ain't you ashamed, now," he addressed Whiskers, "takin' the playthings away from some pore old has-been, prob'ly in his second or third childhood! What do you think yer repersentin' this time, anyway?"

Beck's old leather face had turned an angry maroon; but he swallowed his temper, and answered mildly. It seemed to him that he smelled more aguardiente in the room than was accounted for by his own breath.

"I'm a cabin boy on a ship," he growled.

The fat one suddenly dropped his ponderously playful attitude. His small gray eyes made a very fair attempt to gimlet Whiskers.

"W'ere'd you leave your valise? An' your saddlebags? An' that sack?"

"Refuse to answer," said Beck, "on advice of counsel."

"This here's no laughin' matter," the other rumbled. "Them banditries of yours may be all very neat an' pleasant, but you've went jest a leetle too far. That man you killed happened to be the sheriff's brother.

"Now look here. You come clean with me an' tell me where the stuff is an' I'll see that yuh get a fair, square trial. Nobody never made a mistake by comin' clean with Cap Walker. If I'm with you you got a chance. If I'm against you, yo're in one hell of a fix, mister, an' don't you ferget it. Now you jest better—"

"I don't know who you are an' I don't give a damn!" said Whiskers. "That ain't all. You don't know who I am, an' never see me before in your life. Mark my words, you better be all-fired—"

Walker waved an incredulous fat hand at Whiskers as he turned to Ed.

"Would you believe it?" he demanded

"Jest because he's got some phoney w'iskers on he thinks he's in disguise or somethin'. Jest like we couldn't know him plain by his eyes, an' nose, an' build, an' clo'es. Why, feller, we knew you was comin' here, an' from w'ich way, an' w'en, before you ever started. Every Mex in the town was ready an' willin' to help us—they ain't fergot that Verdad affair, not by no means. Well, we'll jest have an end to this hidin' behind spinach, if that's w'at's holdin' the show back. Off they come!"

Walker heaved himself up, took a step forward, grabbed Beck's beard and yanked.

Tears of pain came to the old man's eyes—but the whiskers stayed where they were.

An amazed, unbelieving look spread over the fat man's whisky-flushed face. It was followed by a new determination. Walker seized Whiskers' beard with both hands and jerked once, twice, three times, each time harder than before. Then he bent over Whiskers and minutely examined the beard at its roots. Finally he stepped back and sat down.

"Ed," he said wheezily, with the air of one flabbergasted, "they're real. This ain't him at all. We're jobbed, Ed, jest plain jobbed."

Then suddenly he swelled like a cinched burro; his brief eyebrows went up, his mouth opened and he burst into soprano guffaws. Slowly, rustily at first, but with increasing celerity, the high cackling laughter poured from him. He rocked in his chair, his face reddened; the tears appeared on his cheeks and he held himself with flipper-like hands, as if fearful that he would burst. Now and again the laughter subsided to exhausted giggles, only to break forth again in renewed roars.

"The look," he gasped at last, "on his—face!"

Laughter again, and more laughter, till he shook like a great weak hooped keg with a dog fight inside.

The long lean young man viewed all

with a uniform sadness. Whiskers, however, was boiling. The tip of his fan-like white beard quivered, and on his forehead the veins stood rigid.

"Leave him—loose," gasped Walker at last.

Obediently the youth named Ed unlocked the handcuffs from the wrists of Whiskers Beck and put them in his pocket. Whiskers, his eyes quiet and gleaming now, studied the holstered Colt that sagged from the man's gun belt on the right; noted how the fat man with the star leaned limply against the wall, staying the last of his chuckles as best he could and wiping his eyes with his handkerchief. The young man stooped to unlock the chain shackles from Whiskers' legs; the lock snapped free.

With his right hand Whiskers pressed the man's head down as he brought his own knee up with all his strength. The bony old knee caught the other between the eyes, and he slumped. Beck's left hand had already gripped the butt of the gun at the young man's belt; he changed the gun to his right hand as he sprang across the room.

"Feel *that*?" he demanded, prodding the gun into the fat man's stomach. And the other let his own gun drop back into its holster as his arms went above his head. Whiskers disarmed him.

"Now put the handcuffs on yore sorrowin' friend," he ordered harshly, "afore he wakes up . . . That's good. Got another pair? Fine. Turn around an' stick yore hands back. Now we'll jest harness yore left leg to his left leg with these chain fixin's, so's yo're shore goin' to do a close lockstep if yuh come out o' here with 'em on.

"Now, gents—I'm right sorry you ain't got no whiskers to pull. An' I ain't got any paint, ner feathers an' m'lasses, to make you look any funnier 'n you do now. So I guess I'll jest leave you here to think over how a pore, dodderin' old

man, that didn't have good sense, come it over the two o' you.

"It'll take three hours to file you two apart, so's I'll be on the train when you leave here. You better foller an' ketch me—so's we'll have some real fun explainin' in court how come the two of you was handcuffed an' left behind by a pore old feller without no weepens but two hands an' a knee.

"I'll leave your guns an' your keys with the tickit agent at the railroad. The tin star, though, I'm afeard I'll have to keep with the cat skin an' the china egg an' such like truck that don't mean nothin'. Now holler yore heads off gents—I'm leavin'!"

MOUNTED on a shaggy burro—the nearest thing to a horse that the village could produce—Whiskers left San Juan. He disdained to fork his ignoble mount; he sat sidewise instead, like a man sitting on a log. That way he could better keep his feet from trailing on the ground. Behind followed a second burro, bearing a Mexican boy and Beck's valise.

"Maybe," said the boy as they plodded past the last house, "I should run back after a bottle of something to drink."

"Not much," said Whiskers, leisurely making a cigaret. He hitched one of his gun belts into a more comfortable position. "Can'tcha see I'm fleein' fer my life?"

As they drew away, Whiskers flung a leg over the burro's rump, so that he sat facing the tail. Here and there a golden light in San Juan was set like a jewel into the dark; over the village the pitying night crouched low, concealing the scars of time. In the glow of the stars San Juan once more looked as it had many years ago, when its friendly houses beside the Pipestone were beautiful in the dusk. But Whiskers was undeceived.

"Peace!" he spat. "Quiet! Blah!"

A story of a hill feud and the man called Devil Harlan

THE LIGHTS

of

RIP SHIN BALD

By Hapsburg Liebe

YOUNG Dev Harlan leaped the Lower Rip Shin Branch of the Tumbling Fork of Upper Little Big Creek and hastened into a dim, snowy path that led through a dense wood of hemlock and poplar, carrying his rifle lightly. Another quarter of an hour, and he was opening a weatherbeaten, split paling gate, before a rambling old cabin of unhewn logs.

A lean, brown bearded man came to the door. Then Old Babe Harlan recognized his one son and hastened down through the snow to meet him.

"How air ye, Pap?" Dev Harlan drawled gladsomely.

The steel gray eyes of Old Babe were a little narrow, as he gripped his son's hand.

"I'm all right, I reckon, Dev. We 'lowed ye mought be dead, us not a-hear-

in' from ye no time. Did ye enjoy yeself a big heap out yan?"

Harlan the younger glanced toward the empty front doorway. It yawned almost tragically. There was a question that he dreaded to ask. He'd had an odd sort of premonition, just as he'd put hand to the gate's latch. Strange that the possibility of this had not occurred to him before!

"I had a bodacious upscuddle of a time out yan," he managed to say. "Everywhar I follered my nose, I got into rimp-tions o' trouble. Anybody'd know that Dev was a shortenin' o' Devil, Pap. Them furriners tuck hit plum' quare, a sight of 'em, and I had to be allus a-scrimmagin', but not till yit has a thrashin' been put on me. What decisioned ye to name me that, Pap, anyhow? Hit shorely sounds brig-aty!"



Harlan the elder fingered at his beard. His explanation will fall short, doubtless, to the sophisticated mind.

"You was our fust baby, Dev. I hated to see ye grow up, I was so proud o' ye. Devil was jest a pet name."

Still the front doorway was empty, yawning. Still Dev Harlan was not able to ask the question that he longed to ask. But he inquired—

"How's Mert, and M'liss and little Becky, Pap?"

Old Babe Harlan's face lost a shade of its color. He answered, after a moment of heavy silence:

"They air all right, I reckon. Mert's at her Unc' Dalt's, and M'liss is at her Unc' Littleford's, and Becky's at Cousin Lige's."

The newcomer swallowed. Awkwardly he took off his broad brimmed, black felt hat and ran cold fingers through his thick, chestnut brown hair. Then he put his hat on again, thrust his hand into his pocket and jingled the ten twenty-dollar gold pieces that he had brought home, the savings of three years.

"I got a present for mother, Pap. I couldn't think me o' any purties to buy her, that she'd like, and so I jest fetched money, gold money. She's what I missed the most, out yan. Whar is she, Pap?"

There it was, the question. He fairly held his breath, while he waited for the answer.

"She dre'mp you was a-comin' home, last night and the night afore, Dev," muttered Old Babe. "I reckon she'd be a-settin' by the kitchen stove now, a-watchin' a bilin' o' shuck-beans. You mought go in and see her."

He was superbly honest, but no diplomat whatever.

Dev Harlan put his rifle down on the porch floor, as he hurried into the cabin. An old blind dog—his dog, playmate of his boyhood—rose from its place on the warm hearth and whined a welcome to him, but he gave it scarcely a glance. In the lean-to kitchen a woman sat in a home-made chair near a glowing cast iron "step" stove that was a year older than

Dev Harlan. She had a cheap new shawl over her half plump shoulders; she was not much past forty and pretty enough.

The young mountaineer halted just inside the kitchen door. The blind dog nosed his hand affectionately, and he jerked the hand away. Now he knew why his sisters were not at home. The one that he had missed so much was gone, and his father had married again!

For a full minute the two in the kitchen stared at each other in silence; their faces had become white. Then Dev Harlan wheeled and left her. The gold in his pocket clinked tantalizingly. His father met him on the porch. Contempt was written deeply in the countenance of the younger man.

"I reckon you done went and played hell, Pap," he said and his voice had the ring of ice.

In defense of himself, Old Babe Harlan replied quickly, straightforwardly:

"She tuck sick and died less ner a month atter you left. We had no way o' gittin' the news to you, bekaze we didn't know ner guess whar you was at. Serena's people had jest settled hyar on Rip Shin Bald. Serena was awful good to me and the gyurls, endurin' the time o' our trouble. She was a widder o' fifteen year standin', with no children. Hit come to be so I felt we couldn't git along withouten her.

"The gyurls thought the sun riz and sot in Serena. Ontel we married, that is; then them gyurls jest scooted off like a pack o' young tarkeys from a wildcat! Dev, I—I waited more'n a year. I was might' nigh dead with bein' so lonesome. None o' us couldn't cook wo'th a dang. Serena hoped you'd mebbe straighten things out for us, when you got back, a-knowin' how Mert and M'liss and little Becky nigh wushiped the ground onder yore feet."

It was quite the longest speech this taciturn hillman had ever made. The corners of Dev Harlan's mouth curled with scorn.

"Serena," he growled, and it was a gall bitter growl, "is that her name—Serena?"

"Serena Miller, she was, Dev."

"Furriners?"

"Nary one, Dev. Good folks. Old Grandsir Miller is a preacher o' the Gawspel. Serena and me hoped you'd see things in a sensibler way, Dev. But I reckon you don't."

Harlan, junior, stooped and snatched up the rifle he had dropped a few minutes before.

"No," he said, his voice harder than ever, "I reckon I don't."

With that, he hastened away. He didn't bother to open the gate; he sprang lightly over the split paling fence and was soon swallowed up in the white blanketed woodland. It would not have interested him greatly, perhaps, had he known of that which took place at the old home cabin shortly after his departure.

Serena Harlan, her face drawn, came out to the porch. Her husband was staring off at nothing in particular.

"I reckon I better go back to my kin, Babe," she said. "I cain't stay hyar and keep yore home bruck up this a-way."

"You'll go nowhar," was her husband's prompt reply. And that was all that Old Babe Harlan had to say about it.

STRAIGHT to a small cleared space on the mountainside above went Dev Harlan. In the clearing a few short rows of slatestone slabs were set on end in the ground, and in the slabs had been chiseled misspelled names and dates. He soon found the one that he looked for and sat down in the snow beside it.

Out of his pocket there came then the two hundred dollars in gold, useless money. He gripped it vise tight in his cold hand, vise tight, as if to see whether it would bleed, or whether his hand would bleed. The earth was very loose; it was leaf mold and bits of slate. Dev Harlan swept aside a little of the snow, dug a shallow hole in the earth with his hand, put the ten twenty-dollar gold pieces into the hole and covered them.

Soon the velvety sound of footfalls came from behind him. He half turned his head and saw a tall, bent, very old man,

whose hair and beard were perfectly white, and who walked with the aid of a long sourwood staff.

"Howdy, son," the old man drawled. "I am John Miller, but they call me mostly Old Grandsir, and I sorter like hit. I been up on the mounting a-tryin' to spot me out some red sassafras for both tea and medicine; hit thins out the humors and stagnations o' the blood and regilates the system. I reckon you air a stranger hyar. Who mought you be?"

The other rose with the suddenness of a jack-in-a-box, rifle in hand.

"I mought be the gov'nor o' Nawth Ca'liner," he said, "but I ain't. I'm Devil Harlan, that's who I am! John Miller, humph! Hit 'minds me, that name, that I got to go and take me a shot at a Miller. Life's too draggy out hyar now. I've jest p'int blank got to start me a little feud, right off!"

Old Grandsir stood there staring. Shaking rhododendrons at the lower edge of the clearing showed him where the younger man had disappeared.

Old Grandsir Miller, too, went down the mountainside, and he looked no more that day—nor for many a day afterward—for red sassafras.

Dev Harlan went to the home of Dalton Harlan, bearded giant, who had qualities that made him a leader. Mert, sixteen, oldest of Old Babe's three daughters, greeted her brother with a shy kiss and danced for joy. A cousin ran to bring Melissa and little Rebecca. The newcomer and his uncle sat down before a crackling wood fire in the wide mouthed fireplace and waited, and they had not long to wait.

The log house was soon crowded with Harlans and their dogs. The midday meal was announced, and only menfolk gathered in homemade chairs around the homemade, oilcloth covered dining table.

Now that he had sufficient audience facing him, the guest of honor began:

"Mebbe the Miller dummern'd leave with her folks, ef we-uns was to run the Millers offen Rip Shin Bald, Unc' Dalt. Shorely, we settled hyar fust. Hit's our

mountain, Unc' Dalt."

"Mebbe Unc' Babe'd go 'long with her too," suggested an inexperienced youth from the doorway.

Littleford Harlan paused in the act of pouring his coffee into a saucer to cool it, lifted his shaggy brows and frowned at his unwise son.

"You're a leetle too brash, Bob," he said. "Make a bust like that agin, and I'll lay a dost o' hick'ry ile on yore back. Babe hain't no traitor to his kin."

"Joab Miller is the boss o' them Millers," said Dalton Harlan, from his place at the head of the table. "He's sorter brigaty, 'pears to me, Dev. He's the one ye ort to lay the Gawspel down to. Shorely, hit's our mountain, bekaze we settled hyar fust. Whatever ye do, Dev, rickollect, you got all o' us a-scotchin' for ye. Shoot to kill, when ye shoot, ef you air a-hankerin' to."

Dev Harlan was thoughtful. He shook his head.

"I reckon I'll give 'em a chanst to up and leave, fust. Five days to go, I'll give 'em, and I figgerate hit'll work. I'll clip this hyar Joab Miller's ear with a bullet, when I tell him, jest to show him hit ain't no fool joke. How many Millers air they, Unc' Dalt?"

"Seventeen menfolks of 'em and sixteen o' we-uns," was the answer. "All squirrel eye shots, too. Hit'd make a right smart of a match, Dev."

SHORTLY after the meal was over, Dev Harlan took his rifle under his arm and went toward the cabin home of Joab Miller, which was a good mile away and on a bank of the Fork. He kept to the thicker places in the woods and made no more noise than if he had been stalking a deer down the wind.

But there was one who followed him fairly close and unseen, in spite of his caution. It was a very pretty girl, in a faded and torn calico dress and coarse shoes without stockings. She wore an old shawl about her slender shoulders. Her copper colored hair, which was caught at the back of her neck by a frayed and

faded ribbon, seemed to hold light when there was no light. She had a rifle.

When the Harlan came to a rather large, almost new building, of whole logs, clapboards and puncheons, he stopped short. The door was without a latch and it stood ajar. Curiosity led him to step inside. There were two rows of crude benches, and a crude pulpit rose at the farther end of the room. It was a meeting house there in the Great Smoky wilderness, a church, a place of worship, and the Millers had built it.

Dev Harlan chuckled oddly. Then he heard rapid footsteps behind him; he turned quickly, his rifle ready. There before him stood the girl, Joab Miller's lone daughter.

"You ort to take yore hat off when you're in this house, Devil," she reminded him.

For a wonder, perhaps, Dev Harlan did it. He was both surprised and amused, apparently. There was a fine charm about her, but it was wasted on Harlan. She kept looking straight at him with blue eyes that were full of purpose, and it made him somehow ill at ease.

"Well, by godlings!" he said sharply. "What is it, dummern?"

"I was jest a-thinkin'," Joab Miller's daughter told him, "what a nice young man you air—accordin' to yore lights."

Harlan's smile broadened.

"Accordin' to my lights, humph? But my lights air purty dim; is that the idee, dummern?"

"Purty dim," the girl answered frankly. "You air like solid rock, or steel, without any shape a-tall, and with no fo'ce 'cept brute fo'ce. Start a big rock down the mountain. Will it stop? Not afore the bottom. Brute fo'ce. That's you. You're about to do a fool thing, Devil Harlan."

One of the young hillman's eyes narrowed. Twice she had called him by his unfortunate nickname. She knew who he was. Certainly she was none of his people, which meant that she must belong to the Miller set. Having come this far with it, his mind readily made the connection; the old man whom he had seen higher on

the mountainside had told her about him. But the girl had heard much of him before that.

"Old Grandsir 'lowed mebbe you-uns'd come hyar to meetin' with we-uns," she said. "He's a good preacher, Old Grandsir is. He usened to bust pulpits with his fist sometimes. 'Do right for the sake o' right, and not bekaze you air afeard you'll go to hell if you don't, and not bekaze you hope to go to heaven ef you do—' That's his whole religion, and hit's a good 'un, Devil Harlan. Speakin' o' lights, his idee is to brighten up the lights o' the people o' Rip Shin Bald."

Harlan asked—

"What mought yore name be, sister?"

"Serena Miller. In a-pickin' a scrimmage with my kin, do you think you air a-doin' right?"

"Serena Miller!" exploded Harlan. "How many Serena Millers did you-uns' folks have, anyhow?"

"Three," she said promptly. "The one that married Old Babe and my granmaw—which was Old Grandsir's wife, and she's dead now—and me. Hit's a fambly name. I allus thought hit was right purty. I—"

But Dev Harlan had wheeled and left her.

He went by a circuitous route through the woodland, until he came to Tumbling Fork. He waded the stream at the lower end of a knee deep shoal and made very plain footprints in the snow on the other bank to the edge of a rhododendron copse; then he walked backward in his footprints to the creek, crossed back, waded up the rippling shoal water's rim for some thirty yards, stepped out and hurried into a thicket of undergrowth that led to the windswept crest of a ridge, where his trail would be dim if not wholly indiscernible.

Ten minutes more and Harlan was ensconcing himself behind a snowcapped boulder at the base of one of Rip Shin Bald Mountain's sheerest cliffs, with Joab Miller's cabin hardly a full stone's throw from him. Both to the right and to the left, along the bottom of the preci-

pice, were sheltering boulders and cedars. If the Millers shot back at him, when he fired the ear clipping bullet which was to accompany his ultimatum, and the retaliation became too warm for one man to face, these boulders and cedars would cover his retreat nicely. His Uncle Dalton had helped to work this out.

Joab Miller's daughter, however, knew more of woodcraft than Dev Harlan had guessed. While he had been laying a trail that he thought would delay her sufficiently, Serena Miller had been moving straight toward the cliff's top, surely a point of vantage.

When he reached the huge, snowcapped stone below her, the girl was watching his every movement closely. She was careful not to dislodge a pebble, to fall and betray her presence; she wanted to be sure that he meant to do what Old Grandsir had told her that he meant to do, before she made her presence known. To kill a feud in its birth, that was her worthy and righteous hope. She had been through one of these bitter, little mountain wars, back in the Blue Ridge, and she remembered all of it. There had been twenty-six able-bodied men of the Millers then, instead of seventeen.

Serena Miller stood against the two yard shard of a dead scrub oak which had grown a little outward from the cliff's brink. A clump of sheep laurel masked the worm eaten bole with green, and kept the girl fairly out of sight from below.

Dev Harlan, not less than forty feet under her, took care that the sights of his weapon were clean and that there was no obstructing snow in its muzzle. Just as he was about to call Joab Miller to the door of the log house, the voice of the girl, low in tones, but quite determined, floated down to him.

"You go straight back home, Devil Harlan!"

The surprised young mountaineer half turned, and looked upward quickly. He could see only a tiny patch of copper colored hair, and the threatening barrel of a rifle.

Serena Miller's voice came on:

"I think I unnerstand yore consarnin' about yore mother a-bein' gone and somebody else in her place, and hit's shore tur'ble; but you shain't do this hyar thing. You go right straight b-b-back home!"

"Yeuh?" sneered the man below. "Why don't ye make me go home? You got a rifle gun thar. Make me go! You ain't got the narve to use that thar gun, dum-mern; you ain't got the narve!"

"Please, Devil, go back," the girl begged. "Don't you see what hit'll lead to ef you shoot?"

Interrupting her, there was a hollow, snapping sound. The rotted shard of scrub oak was breaking off short at its roots. Serena Miller was falling toward Harlan!

There wasn't time to think. There wasn't time for much of anything. Dev Harlan had to act upon the sheerest impulse, or act not at all. If she fell to the naked stones, she would be killed instantly; if, instead of leaping out of the way, he tried to break her fall, in all likelihood he himself would be killed as the buffer.

His muscular young body obeyed the first impulse of his half wild heart. He attempted to catch the slender, hurtling figure in his arms. He had a glimpse of wide, blue eyes and a deathly white face, as she came down upon him like a plummet.

And that was all he remembered of her fall.

DEV HARLAN came back to consciousness slowly. A bright yellow spot developed in the blackness, became more and more distinct, and ere long he saw that it was the flame of an oil lamp that was on a high mantel. Then it was night, he knew. His eyelids had opened; but they seemed stiff, lazy, tired. An odd numbness lay over his body, but he was not immediately concerned with this; there was no need for him to move, he guessed.

His memory returned. He recalled the girl's dropping from the cliff and his attempt to catch her. He wondered

whether he had been successful. Then he became cognizant of sounds—the steady ticking of an old fashioned wooden clock on the high mantel near the lamp, the far off baying of a hound, the sad howl of a wintry wind under frozen clapboard eaves. Then a chair creaked, and a grotesque shadow moved on the log wall back of his bed. A tall form came between him and the lamp's yellow flame.

It was, he saw, old Grandsir Miller. Dev Harlan was about to speak, but he checked himself. He was in the home of an enemy. He would keep still and see what they had to say about him.

Old Grandsir bent, and put a hand on Dev's bandaged head. There was the pungent odor of turpentine, the cure-all of the mountaineer.

"No fever, to speak of," drawled Old Grandsir. "Hit's plum' quare, why he ain't come to. Ten hours like this hyar; why, I never hyeard o' the like afore! Hit's a-turnin' awful cold out. We must be keerful and not let him chill."

Two more chairs creaked at the fire-side—three. Beside the aged hillman appeared Dalton and Old Babe Harlan and Old Babe's second wife. The man abed eyed them between lids that were almost closed. The people looked anxious and a little haggard. Then a stranger appeared among them, a tall and poorly dressed, elderly man, with sunburned yellowish hair and beard. Something about him, a certain rugged fineness, perhaps, reminded Dev Harlan of the girl who had fallen over the precipice.

It was Joab Miller. He spoke softly, and with rare feeling:

"Dev shorely saved Serena, when he could ha' jest let her drap and saved himself, instid, and I'd give him my life ef I could. Old Grandsir, you know a toddick o' doctorin', and I charge ye, afore the Lord A'mighty, don't you let him die!"

Young Harlan curbed a faint smile. So he had saved Serena. Well, he told himself, that was all right; why shouldn't it be? That was what he had meant to do, wasn't it? Anyway, he had already done it, and it couldn't be undone. But, that

other Serena, she who had usurped his mother's place—the bare thought of her was as flame to a powder magazine.

"Die, hell!" he cried, and those who stood looking down upon him jumped as if a corpse had spoken in their midst. "Who's a-goin' to die, anyhow?"

Old Grandsir half whispered—

"Don't none o' you-uns contrary him; he's natchelly tetchous now."

Dev Harlan's lean face had suddenly become a mask of terror. His stark, staring, steel gray eyes told of a fear that was greater by many times than the fear of death.

"I cain't move nary hand ner arm ner leg," the others heard him say, in queer, bleak tones.

He was not mistaken. The winner of a hundred lumberjack battles was as helpless as a baby.

"Thar's a quare feelin' in the back o' my neck at the backbone, whar hit struck a rock, I reckon, and from thar on down I'm paralyzed—I tell ye, I'm paralyzed! Pap, you had to go and marry agin, didn't ye? Yeuh, you did; you jest had to go and git ye a dummern to live with!"

Serena Harlan's rather fine shoulders slumped as if from the shock of a bullet.

As for Serena Miller, she had not been seriously hurt in the fall.

THE COLD became bitter, and it lasted for days. The doughty men who carried hides and ginseng root and corn to a crossroads store and grist mill fifteen miles away, and returned with provisions, boasted of their good fortune in not having any frostbites. Game was holed up, and there was no hunting. The one regular occupation of the people of Rip Shin Bald was to cut firewood and keep fires going.

Joab Miller refused to allow Dev Harlan to be taken from his home in such weather. The helpless mountaineer himself had nothing to say, one way or the other, about the matter. Not the most trifling interest did he show in anything. To Dev Harlan the whole world seemed

irretrievably lost. His brooding silence was as bitter as anything he said, except, perhaps, this—

"What a dad-burned shame hit is that thar hain't a-goin' to be no blood feud, atter all!"

"Feud!" echoed Old Grandsir. His smile was kindly. "Dev, y'ort to seed yore folkse and mine a-pairin' off together, a Harlan and a Miller, a Miller and a Harlan, yeste'day—Sunday—at the meetin' house, when I preached!"

Harlan spent the daylight hours before the fire in a rocker that was lined with an untanned bearskin. Serena Miller, who owed him her life and would never forget it, kept with him faithfully. She fed him the little that he ate, bathed his face and his hands, combed his hair, made him as comfortable as it was possible for him to be. He scarcely spoke to the girl, save for a short yes or no in answer to her questions. His father, his three worshipful sisters and others of his people visited him frequently, and he had not much more talk for them.

His brokenhearted stepmother had not dared to brave his wrath by coming back. Her presence would have upset him much, she knew.

The girl was hard driven to find something that would lift him, even temporarily, out of his despondency. One morning Serena Miller came down the cabin loft ladder with new hope in her eyes. She had a children's story book in her hands.

"I can read jest a bitty smidgen, Dev," she told him, sitting down in a straight backed chair, beside his bearskin lined rocker.

"I want my boots on," he snarled.

He had worn her nerves to the raw, but she had kept that fact well to herself. She drew his boots on and laced them neatly. Then she resumed her place beside him and opened the story book.

"I can read a smidgen, Dev. I l'arned how at a mission school in the Blue Ridge. I got a book hyar which is full o' purty pitchers, and hit tells about a lot o' big old giants and wolfs and a teensy, bitty gyurl named Goldilocks, and one named

Cinderella. Le' me read about 'em to ye, Dev, won't ye?"

"I don't give—"

The fact that he had caught himself on the utterance of an oath sent a happy thrill through Serena Miller. Delighted, she read two of the stories to him, though she had difficulty with the longer words. Toward the last he was sufficiently interested to ask her to read parts of stories the second time.

Then he broke out suddenly in fresh rebellion:

"Not a finger can I ever move. I've even got to be fed with a spoon, like a danged baby! Don't ye git tard and wore out with me, Serena? Say, don't ye? Whyn't you-uns send me off to a pore-house some'eres?"

The miracle had happened; he had tears in his eyes. Serena Miller herself choked.

"We air a-goin' to marry, Dev," she almost whispered, "so's I can stay with ye all the time, as long as we live."

Devil Harlan's eyelids dropped slowly and shut out the light of the wintry day. Footsteps on the porch startled the girl. The front door opened, and Joab Miller and Old Grandsir walked in, without having stamped the snow from their cowhide boots.

"Serena Harlan ain't nowhar to be found," Joab Miller announced, his gaze on the pitifully helpless figure in the bear-skin rocker. "Old Babe, yore pap, he's nigh crazy. She went airly in the night, last night, atter he'd went to sleep. She'd told him, Old Babe said, that thar was somethin' to be done which nobody else but her could do, and wouldn't tell him what hit was. Have you got any idee about hit, Dev?"

"I hain't no idee about hit," young Harlan answered.

Said Old Grandsir, his voice tragic:

"She didn't have no wrap but a shawl, and we're martal afeard she'll freeze. Old Babe and Dalton and them and we-uns tried to track her, but the snow was too old and dry and windswept, and anyhow hit was too full o' other tracks to single

out her'n. Nigh all o' the menfolks on this hyar mounting air out a-lookin' for her, and I only hope we find her alive."

The two men went back to continue in the search.

The day dragged on, and still they hadn't found a trace of the missing Serena Harlan. Night fell, and two hours later a pair of stalwart hillmen stopped at Joab Miller's long enough to lift Dev Harlan from his rocker and put him to bed.

Old Grandsir, heartbroken over the apparent loss of the relative whom for years he had secretly thought of as quite the best of all Millers, sat at the fireside of his son Joab, and muttered unintelligibly.

"What, Grandsir?" asked his granddaughter.

"The ways o' God A'mighty on Rip Shin Bald air a leetle hard to unnerstand; but we-uns air a-doin' right for the sake o' right, and not bekaze we're afeard we'll wind up in hell ef we-uns don't, and not bekaze we hope to git to heaven ef we do—and so I reckon hit'll all come out for the best in the end."

As the clock began to strike twelve, there was a noise on the porch outside and then a low rapping at the door. The end of the world could hardly have amazed Old Grandsir more than that which came to pass in that house between midnight and dawn.

AGAIN Dev Harlan's vision picked up a yellow spot in the gloom, and again the yellow spot resolved itself into the fan shaped flame of an oil lamp. But this lamp was not on the mantel, though there was one on the mantel; this was in Dalton Harlan's hands. Back of the giant mountaineer, a frost streaked window was beginning to show the first faint light of a clear daybreak. There was a peculiar odor in the room.

Dev Harlan noted that his bedside was lined with silent people, and that his father, Serena Miller, Old Grandsir and a rather dapper looking stranger were among them. He sat up in bed. He was not paralyzed any more!

"Be careful, Dev," the stranger said.

"Who mought you be?" Harlan asked queerly.

The answer came at once:

"I'm a doctor from Maysville. I've just fixed up a dislocated cervical vertebra for you; you got it in the fall, you know. You're all right now, but you must keep reasonably still for awhile."

Harlan remembered everything. The hateful odor was that of ether; he'd smelled it more than once before, following lumber camp accidents. Whatever measure of joy he felt over his return whole to the walks of men, he kept to himself.

"How come you here, Doctor?" he wanted to know.

"Your mother brought me. She trudged fifteen miles in the bitter cold to the cross-roads store and got a telephone message to me from there; I rode horseback out to the store, and then walked back here with her. There were men who could have gone, but she wanted to do it herself, for you. And then, Dev, she knew that mountain men are sometimes prejudiced against town doctors."

After a moment of silence—

"What're you a-goin' to charge me?" drawled Harlan.

"I'm paid; two hundred dollars in gold."

"In gold?"

"Twenty-dollar gold pieces, ten of them, Dev, here in my pocket. But if I kept that money I'd feel worse than Judas. I want you to do exactly what you first planned to do with it, Dev."

The ten golden coins tinkled musically down to the bedclothes beside the patient's knee. There was silence again, but a feminine voice from the kitchen doorway soon broke it—

"Breakfast, you-uns."

Those at the bedside dispersed, all but Serena Miller, while Dev Harlan was wondering how he could thank the doctor. The girl sat down on the edge of the bed and smiled at Harlan. Then a woman rose from the depths of the bear-skin rocker before the fire and came toward them. She walked as one who is very weary, but she, too, was smiling.

"Whar'd you git that gold money?" Dev Harlan inquired.

"I got hit whar you put hit at, Dev," answered Serena Harlan. "I'm a-de-pendin' on you to forgive me, honey. I jest couldn't see no other chanst for a-savin' ye."

"What—what was you a-doin' up thar whar I buried hit at?"

"You hadn't buried hit much, Dev. I was in a martial heap o' trouble, and I went up thar, you mought say, to sorter ax for some help a-consarnin' what to do."

She was so tired that she almost crumpled to the bedside, close to him and close to the bright eyed girl. He gathered up the gold pieces with a single sweep of his hand, and dropped them into her lap.

"Thar," he said, "them's yore'n."

Serena Harlan put the money into Serena Miller's lap.

"Thar," said she, "use hit to go to housekeepin' on—you two."

The Bogas of Magdalena

· BY EDGAR YOUNG

UP IN Bogotá, Colombia, where every man is either a poet or an orator, they speak of the Magdalena as "the Danube of South America." It serves as a figure of speech but there is little similarity between the two. Neither is it the Nile or the Congo. It is the Magdalena, unique unto itself.

In the eastern Andes men toil and grub for gold and platinum along the headwater streams. A million dollars a month has been coming out for centuries. The bulk of the world's emeralds come from up there. There are waterfalls that make the sheer leap from pine-grown cliffs to palm-strewn plains.

Each tiny stream pours its contents into larger streams. Across the flat plateaus and temperate *sabanas* these streams hurry. At the edge of the plateaus they plunge again from temperate to torrid zone. Shallow, disreputable, vast, the Magdalena spreads across the northern plains, broad as the Mississippi at New Orleans, through the reeky atmosphere of Nature's hothouse, toward the Caribbean. In this portion its banks remind one of the carboniferous age.

The jungles are anarchies of life. There are trees and bushes and lianas massed together into walls of vegetation. The bush ropes swing from the branches and take root in the ground. Vines climb the trunks and grope upward into the branches, and knit them together. There are eleven hundred sorts of palms. There are twenty-five hundred kinds of orchids. There are fruits and nuts and roots.

Back within the jungle is terror and conflict—the deep growl of the jaguar, the sharp squeal of the panther, the bubbling howl of the red ape, the moan of the sloth, the scream of the wild pig. Atop the trees flit vociferous parrots, and

scarlet macaws tinged with yellow and green, noisy and restless. Snakes of all lengths slide and slither along the ground or climb the tree-trunks. In the amazing natural clearings—*esteros*—wild cattle bury their backs in rich Para and Guinea grass.

Along the river flop giant cranes, cormorants, river fowl. The bars and beaches—*playas*—crawl with caymans, turtles and iguanas. In the water are a hundred sorts of fish, some voracious and cannibal, and the great river cow or *manatí*. Sharks are plentiful for a thousand miles up the river.

The bars are treacherous. The current gnaws at the banks. Sternwheel steamers have made the trip from the coast up to La Dorada in a week. Others have taken three months, and yet others have never arrived. The river changed its course while they were tied up for the night and left them marooned in a steaming morass where the vegetation engulfed them.

Dredging has been attempted, but the entire bottom is shifting for a thousand miles. The river must be used. The republic of Colombia, a quarter as large as the United States, must get her products out to the world. She helps Brazil supply the world with coffee. There are hundreds of tons of cacao, hundreds of thousands of salted hides. There is vegetable ivory, rubber and an assortment of natural products. The world sends in manufactured goods.

The very typewriters the poets type their lays on are imported from New York. Half of the warehouses along the river are built of American corrugated iron, beneath huge forest giants. The rails, cars and locomotives of the score of tiny railroads that meander down to

the river ports from the mining and coffee regions come from abroad. To other places run pack-mule paths down which mule trains, long and picturesque, carry natural products and take back goods.

The German Company mail hydroplanes which run between Sabanilla and Cartagena and also up the Magdalena as far as Nieva carry passengers. At Girandot connection is made with the railroad for Bogotá.

Not a tenth part of the products come out, not a tenth part of the imports go in, that should go. Nature is too prolific; the temperature too moderate; there is no need of struggle by those living from the soil. Four posts with a thatched roof is a house for the lower class. A hammock or a rawhide makes a bed. Three stones—a *tulpa*—is the stove. A little fruit, corn-cakes and *sancocho* will suffice.

The higher class has its head in the clouds, seeking the inspiration of the muses of poetry and literature and oratory. The literary output is vast. Some of it is even good. A dozen newspapers in Bogotá print nothing but verse, essays and postprandial speeches. There is no hustling bourgeoisie.

However, there is another class. They are neither peons nor dons. Sons of the republic since the conquest, they speak their own language, although there is Spanish mixed in with it and they have added Indian words. This barbarous jargon is called *curralao*, a good half-pure African. These people are the bogas—woolly-headed river-men—tall, robust negroes, with the habits of savages, who man the *champans* of the Magdalena.

The *champans* are huge dugouts, forty to sixty feet long, covered amidships with round shelters of woven withes and branches. These *champans*, with their boga paddlers and punters, handle the bulk of the cargo up and down the river.

Cursing and swearing perpetually at the strong current against which they

work upstream, a half-dozen to a boat, they make the stops at the tiniest of ports, mere sheds with a garden, a few chickens and a goat, and shove off again up the stream. Some run on schedule for short distances, others make the thousand mile trip from the Caribbean to the falls at La Dorada and smaller *champans* make the trips above the falls.

Downstream, the bogas are laughing and happy, swearing only at the rain which pours intermittently, or leaping naked, stop the *champan* to curse the lightning and dare it to strike. The boga never fails to curse the lightning when it flashes. He never fails to curse the cayman when it shows its jagged snout near the *champan*. He never fails to find the box or keg that contains rum or brandy where the traveler has ensconced his own supply, and to appropriate it.

He can safely be trusted with anything except liquor. Its fire makes his curse more fervid as he toils up the river, and his laugh more spontaneous as he floats down. He automatically reacts to snags, seeks the tortuous channels among the bars, dodges waterlogged trees that roll and writhe along the bottom.

He is as good a punter and boat runner as there is in the world. He is simple, frank, brave—not wholly to be despised.

Nor is it all work. Each boga has a black wife or two, or a half-dozen, in his thatched huts at various places along the river. At night, when the *champans* are tied up, the fun begins. There is fried fish and *sancocho* to eat. There is *aguardiente*, *guarapo*, and *chicha* to drink. There are girls, black and yellow, full lipped and lithe bodied. The weird music of the *marimba* strikes up, drumming, haunting, barbaric. The *bambuco* dance begins. Far into the night they bend and writhe and step to the beat of the music. At dawn the *champans* slide away from the shore and head up or downstream. It is a hard life and these are hard men who follow it.

A Story of a Pirate of the Air

ALIAS THE BLACKBIRD

By Joel Townsley Rogers

OUT OF the east she came buzzing—the great *Gold Beetle*, a five ton F5L flying boat, with twin motors roaring. She had come up the Hudson from Manhattan, and headed inland between Haverstraw and West Point, on a line which would have brought her, in three hours' steady flying, straight across New York State to Rochester. She was carrying two hundred and fifty pounds of minted gold, consigned to a Rochester bank, by the most rapid—and what was believed the safest—possible method of transporting such a sizable treasure.

She was up two thousand feet. The Ramapo region of hills, with summits reaching to fifteen hundred feet, heavily forested, and dotted with myriad silver lakes, stretched below her. At this season of the year—it was yellow October—the country was practically deserted, except for the few police officers who maintained forest patrol.

Nimbus formations moved across under the *Gold Beetle's* keel—clouds of a cobweb texture. The air was smooth, with hardly a wrinkle in it; extraordinarily bumpless for mountain air. Kelly, the ship's pilot, held her nose steadily on the horizon. She was a flying ice wagon, and there was as much action to be got out of her as out of a load of cement. Kelly sat with shoulders hunched over his wheel, chewing gum methodically, settled for the long, tedious flight.

The *Gold Beetle* was not many miles inland from the Hudson, when out of nowhere, so it seemed, there came darting after her a little black monoplane with narrow, blackbird wings. It was a curious craft. It bore a rakish pirate look, with its fuselage set above its flare-back wings, and the lone pilot sitting in his cockpit on top of everything, like a man sitting in a coffin.

Swiftly he dropped down toward the big, clumsy flying boat—black helmeted, imperturbable, with goggled eyes staring. His speed was slightly better than the *Beetle's* eighty-five knots. Sliding down the sky, he overtook her. His left wing passed below her right wing pontoon, so that he was just to the rear of her control cockpit, which was forward of her wings, and on the side of her pilot. Now he was not more than twenty feet away from Smike Kelly, the pilot. The two ships were riding wing to wing, and levelly, through the sleek air. The purring motor of the blackbird plane—in audible near the synchronized booming of the *Beetle's* two loud five hundreds—had been throttled down to the big boat's speed.

Smike Kelly was in the right hand seat, with a trooper of the State police force beside him. He turned his head around idly, with a grin on his lips, and lifted his hand in salutation to this unknown ship that rode with him in the air. He had turned his head, lifted up his hand, to face death.



The blackbird flier signaled no "Hands up!" nor gave any time for surrender. Clasp ing his control stick between his knees, he hauled up an automatic rifle in both hands. He steadied his elbow on the cockpit rim, and his grim masked eyes looked along the rifle barrel at the friendly gesturing figure of Smike Kelly, not six yards away from him across thin air. No word he said, but he gripped the trigger hard, and handed out the pepper.

Br-rup! Br-rup! The rifle rattled like a loud, staccato cricket. Above the roaring of the motors one could hear it. *Br-rup! Br-rup!* It croaked its racketing cry, as the blackbird flier jammed in another clip and pumped it empty.

Four men were in the *Beetle*—Smike Kelly, with the constabulary officer seated beside him; a second trooper in the cabin abaft the wings, two hundred and fifty pounds of man sitting on two hundred and fifty pounds of gold coin in ten strong iron hooped pine boxes; and Captain Hammer in the observer's well, out on the nose.

Captain Hammer was a flyer himself, with a famous war record. He was the man who brought down the *L99*, you remember, the great German bombing Zeppelin, over Winchelsea; and later he put an end to the air piratings of von Bernau, the flying spy, in a terrific fight. Hammer had an interest in the Rochester bank to which the gold coin was being transported, and it was at his instigation

that the flying boat had been chosen as a means of conveyance. Who ever heard of a stickup in midair? So confident had Hammer been of the *Beetle's* security and of the stolid air ability of Smike Kelly that he had even dozed into a nap out in the bow well, with the pale October sun on his face.

The two constabulary officers were, of course, ground men, and the ways of the air were sickeningly strange to them.

In the howl of the motors no word could have been heard, even had it been shrieked with all fury. *Br-rup! Br-rup!* The swift rifle streaked away. Smike Kelly dropped his head upon the wheel and lay as if asleep.

"Damn me, is this a joke?" bawled the trooper who sat beside Kelly, pounding the pilot hard on the thigh.

Wing to wing the little blackbird held its course. The glassy, unblinking eyes of its pilot stared along the rifle barrel. Then suddenly the little ship went up.

No, it had not gone up; but the *Gold Beetle* had dropped by her bow. With engines opened wide she had nosed over into a glide, slipping like a greased pig down the invisible ramp of the sky. She was inherently stable and showed no signs of spinning. She was merely going down, though with increasing speed.

"Is this a joke?" shouted the trooper again, struggling against his safety strap to stand up.

He felt the breath going out of him,

his ears were roaring. He pounded the pilot on the back.

The head of Smike Kelly had fallen forward; his arms dangled beside him. The shouting trooper drew back his hand, as if it had been scorched with fire. The body he had struck was limp, and there were three crimson stains spreading on the back of Smike Kelly's white shirt. Aye, it was no joke. Smike Kelly had taken the pepper, and his life was spent.

Bow heavy, pilotless, no hand to lift her wheel or close her guns, the *Gold Beetle* rushed down toward the slowly moving cloud and the deserted hills that lay below. The trooper snapped loose his belt; he stood up and bellowed. Crazily he jerked out his revolver and emptied it aloft. But the banging of the gun did him no more good than did the inaudible yells he continued to utter. The little blackbird was out of reach, and the *Gold Beetle* beyond all help of man. She was a doomed ship. She was crashing to her wreck; and the three men alive in her had best say their prayers right speedily, if they had any God to pray to.

Down came the blackbird, lazily curving on dismal wings, following the *Beetle's* wild plunge, ready to pounce on her dead bones and fatten on her, when she was a wreck.

At sound of the sudden rifle rattle and the feel of the big ship's dive, Captain Hammer, in the bow, was aroused abruptly from his indolent day-dreaming. He had not been aware of the approach of the blackbird. He put his hands on the rim of the round well and lifted up his head to stare forth. The blackbird was above him then, wheeling and slipping through the air. Something in the look of it, something in the way it was handled, brought to Hammer a memory that terrified him.

"What—" he screamed at Smike Kelly.

Across the stretch of canvas covered bow, face to face with Captain Hammer, the dead pilot lay at his controls; and his look was not to be mistaken. In that instant he slid flaccidly down from his seat out of sight.

Hammer dived; he flung himself along the narrow tunneled passageway that led to the control cockpit. Prone on his belly, he reached through the hatch door and pushed against the wheel yoke. The pilot's body was jammed against the hatch, and Hammer could not open it sufficiently to squeeze through. He laid all his shoulder weight against the wheel yoke and gripped the rudder bar with strength like iron.

Somewhere behind the big boat the blackbird had dived, and opened up its bickering voice again. *Br-rup! Rup-rup-rup-rup!* It croaked away, flying hard on the *Beetle's* tail and shooting at the controls.

"Blackbird! Blackbird's got me now!" thought Captain Hammer, lying prone and tense in the darkness, feeling the great ship careen. "Blackbird's got me now!"

SERGEANT CEDAR RUDD, who had charge of a fifty square mile section of forest and mountain in the Ramapo hills, inland from Stony Point-on-the-Hudson—riding fire patrol over it spring and fall, gunning for timber thieves and fur thieves in the winter, acting as nursemaid for hordes of city campers in the summer—was a witness to the piracy of the great *Gold Beetle* and the butchery of her pilot in the air.

Cedar Rudd didn't see it all completely, true, for clouds were rolling low overhead; a cobweb nimbus was drifting from the north, not more than five hundred feet above his cabin on Bitter Lake. At times the two planes were hidden by the cloud, like dragons howling and fighting above the world's roof.

Except for Cedar Rudd, no man saw it, for the woods were deserted of casual campers in October; and the Ramapo hills, which can be very lively in July—thronged with motor campers and Boy Scouts; with bookkeepers from the city, wandering around flatfooted, in olive drab shirts and tennis sneakers, pretending to themselves that they are Daniel Boone or Pusquatasossamminie the

Iroquois scalper; with ladies in knickerbockers and silk stockings hopping gaily over the untenanted trails on the hunt for mountain laurel, and squealing louder than pigs when they happen to find a lazy, yellow timber rattler sunning itself on the rocks—the Ramapo hills can be as desolate as the virgin north woods in the season when the katydids are crying and the sumac turns to red.

Sergeant Cedar Rudd was swimming in Bitter Lake, when first he heard the *Beetle* droning on its course from the east. He floated on his back, allowing the yellow sunlight to soak into him, as he observed the passage of clouds. The brown waters of the lake were filled with particles of fine moss and other vegetation; the lake's bottom was "turning over," as Cedar would have explained it; and the thick fluid look of the water gave a peculiar feeling of warmth and solidity. Cedar dozed on the water's breast, keeping one ear open for the braying of his mule, Snowball, stabled across the lake, and allowing his stomach to luxuriate in the thought of a beefsteak dinner that Officer Amsel, in charge of the Iron Mine District to the west of Bitter Lake over the Ridge, had promised him for that night.

"Not much of a woodsman, Amsel ain't," thought Cedar, "and a kind of a funny duck; but he sure can fry the pants off of a beefsteak."

His ears were filled with the roaring of the *Gold Beetle* as it droned through its pathway across the hills, nine hundred feet above him. Clouds passed. When he could see the giant boat again, it was nearly overhead, and the blackbird, appearing out of nowhere, was flying wing and wing with it.

"Pretty," thought Cedar. "Kinda pretty."

Above the engine's noise the blackbird unloosed its sudden rifle yelp. Cedar lifted up his head from the water, listening keenly. About the ways of the air he knew no more than a woodchuck, but he knew the sound of firearms. He had been in war. He handled guns now

in his daily business, and was an excellent marksman.

"A movie fake," he thought. "Dog-gone, it sounds like the real business!"

In that instant the two ships were overhead. Something splashed down beside Cedar's head into the water.

He rolled over, struck down with his arms and arrowed deep. In the brown glinting water he caught it as it settled and brought it to the surface with him. What he held in his palm was a rifle shell, not a blank, but made to kill. Cedar recognized it without hesitation as one of German manufacture, for he had seen the like of it only recently in Amsel's cabin—a souvenir of war.

Again the wicked automatic gun opened up its cricket chirrup, crackling through the heavy bellowing of the *Beetle*. The two ships had passed to the west. Between curling cloud pillows, Cedar caught flashes of them. Nose down, toward the Ridge that rimmed the western sky, the *Beetle* was plunging with loud clamor, like a giant sister to one of the fat, clumsy, stupid, buzzing insects for which she had been named. And darting on her tail, with deft plunges right and left, the little blackbird clung like a hornet, shooting its sting repeatedly.

"Dog-gone, you can't do that and get away with it!" roared Cedar Rudd. "That's damned murder!"

The *Gold Beetle* dropped beyond the Ridge. The sound of her bellowing engines could no longer be heard. All was a silence—a silence on the earth and in the sky. Then Cedar heard Snowball braying across the lake and quiet water lapping on the shore. The thought flashed into his mind, without his pausing to take account of it, that the blackbird made no sound as it flew. If it made a sound, it was so thin and fine that it was indistinguishable from any distance.

The black ship zoomed triumphantly as the *Beetle* dropped. Exultantly, fiercely, it leaped upward, nose pointed to the zenith. It was doing a cannibal dance in honor of its victory. Then it too went down beyond the Ridge.

CEDAR RUDD buried his face and threshed to shore. He hauled on shirt and pants over his dripping body, kicked his feet into shoes, without bothering to lace them, and raced up the steep, rocky slope to his police cabin.

"Ring one-three!" he shouted at his telephone. "One-three! One-three! Ring Amsel at Iron Mine! There's a flying ship crashed down in the Iron Mine District and it looks like murder!"

He stood in his wet shoes.

"Never mind," he said, breathing heavily. "Amsel must be on patrol. Give me headquarters."

He turned, when he had made his report, and plunged out of the cabin door again, and down to the lake shore. With short, wiry snaps of his arms, he pulled himself in a flat bottomed boat across Bitter Lake, drawing a foamy wake behind him.

Snowball brayed him greeting. Cedar cinched a saddle on the fat, white brute. With a *drub-drub* of his heels into Snowball's sleek ribs, he bounced up a narrow rocky trail, heading for Amsel's cabin, in the Iron Mine District, across the Ridge.

Four miles of it he covered, trotting up the slopes and clawing down the steeps, over a mountain hump that nearly touched the low cloud. Snowball's hoofs struck sparks. Cedar Rudd kept a sharp lookout on both sides of the trail. He saw nothing, except the thick forest tangle, crimson and golden; dead leaves dank with autumnal rains, and rotten underfoot; somber boulders, covered with pale green lichens; a chipmunk darting across the trail; a rustle of dead pine needles and ground oak scrub which marked a passing snake.

There came to him from somewhere in the woods the smell of smoke, sharp smoke with a bitter tang. Ordinarily he would have plunged immediately into the thicket, searching it, but now this other business consumed him. He gave a heavy taste of his heels to Snowball, and emerged at a rolling gallop into a narrow, grass carpeted glade, beside the Iron Mine police cabin.

"Amsel!" he shouted. "Amsel! Where are you? There's been murder done around here!"

He swung himself from the white mule's back and strode into the cabin. The telephone was ringing the Iron Mine call—a long ring, three short—*ting-ta-ta-ta! Ting-ta-ta-ta!* Cedar Rudd snapped down the receiver. It was headquarters calling.

"Yea," he answered, "Iron Mine; Cedar speaking. I just come over the Ridge. Both planes must have dropped down somewhere, and I ain't seen any fly away . . . You're throwing a line around the district? . . . Good! . . . Better send up a surgeon, too, I reckon. We'll need him. I'm going to get hold of Amsel now and beat through the woods."

He went outside and spotted some one moving at the far end of the glade, where the grassy level terminated in a steep cliff, tangled with undergrowth and topped with hemlock woods. Cedar strode forward with a swift stride, swinging from the hips. The man was Amsel, black-eyed, alert, cautious in his movements, the patrol officer of Iron Mine.

"Hey, Amsel, what you been doing—mining iron ore on Government property?" asked Cedar.

His quick glance had noted wheel tracks on the grass, and there was a wheelbarrow upended against the cabin wall to explain them. An old mine shaft had its entrance somewhere in that tangled cliff. It was one of a multitude that dotted the hills.

"You're green to the woods, sonny," he told Amsel bluntly. "Don't go fooling around them old shafts. They ain't been used for a hundred and fifty years, and their timbers is rotted away. Most of them is filled with seepage. More than one kid's been caught in them and ain't never been heard of again."

Officer Amsel crept forward slowly. He was a small man, with bright black eyes peering alertly out of a sharp face. His face was very white.

"Them shafts is nothing better than bottomless sinks," said Cedar kindly. "I'd hate to have you drowned in one."

"What has brought you here, Sergeant?" muttered Amsel.

"There's been an airplane crash somewhere around this section," said Cedar. "They passed over Bitter Lake half an hour ago—a big one, and a little black fellow shooting the living daylights out of th' other. They dropped down somewhere on your side of the Ridge. I think we'll find some dead men when we find 'em."

He turned and swung into step with Amsel. They walked back toward the slab boarded cabin.

"Airplanes around here?" asked Amsel with an incredulous laugh. "Where would they find a landing place in the woods? You've been dreaming, Sergeant. I've been near the cabin all day, and I haven't seen or heard anything."

"It's not up to you and me, my boy, to argue what sort of landing fields airplanes do or don't need, or anything about 'em," retorted Cedar Rudd with dignity. "Leave such things to the idiots that fly 'em. If you'd been on the job and 'tending to business as you ought to've been, you couldn't help hearing the hollering and commotion of them planes. Doggone! The big fellow come roaring overhead like Niagara Falls itself, and the little blackbird was doing more shooting than has been heard in these hills in a year."

Amsel stopped, struck by a thought. He shook back the straight black hair, that had a way of tumbling before his eyes, and quirked a bright glance at Cedar Rudd.

"Blackbird?" he repeated. "How do you know?"

"I called it a blackbird because it looked like one," explained Cedar Rudd. "I am not setting myself up as an authority on airplanes and such. I do say it looked like a blackbird."

"Of course I heard shooting," said Amsel slowly. "Who could help hearing? But I didn't bother about it. I thought it was you, Sergeant, amusing yourself with a little target practise."

"The sound was nearer to you than that, Amsel," said Cedar grimly. "If you

want to get along in the woods, you got to know where sounds come from, and how, and what they mean, as well as learning to read immediately all other signs of the forest. Them two planes came down on your side of the Ridge. They weren't a mile away from your front door. The big fellow'll have tore a hole in the woods, where he hit, and the men in him will be dead or dying, while we stand here gassing about it. We got to find him, Amsel, for there's murder in it."

In the wilderness tangle to the left, Cedar Rudd heard a sudden shot. He heeled, tense as a wolf, his green eyes narrowed.

"Hear that! By God, I said it's murder!"

Again a shot. And again, and again, and again. Cedar Rudd plunged toward it, growling deep in his throat, hand on his holster.

CAPTAIN HAMMER lay still a long time after the *Gold Beetle* had crashed. He was prone in the darkness of the forward gangway, a space not much bigger than a coffin.

The great ship, stalling, nose up, as Hammer pushed back the wheel yoke, had poised with treetops brushing her keel, then dropped flat as a pancake. She broke through snapping tree limbs, crashing with shock after shock. Her splintering tail struck the ground first, taking the brunt of the blow, and was immediately shivered to kindling. Then, after a breathless and immeasurable instant, her hull slapped down, with a commotion that shook the forest. Caught in the blind gangway, Hammer saw nothing. There was the sound of shrieking blasphemies; everything about him burst apart, with a roar like dynamite. Then the silence tumbled on him.

Fire was roaring, and the hot sheets of it were scorching his face, when he could observe things again. He was being dragged by the ankles over rocky ground. His shoulders scraped; his head bumped.

"Let go, you fool!" he croaked. "Leg's broken."

He lay supine, twitching, with poisoned darts of pain shooting through his body and centering in his head. A huge man, with blackened face, knelt beside him, hoisting him by the shoulders to a sitting position. Hammer dimly recognized his rescuer as the trooper who had been with the cargo in the cabin of the *Gold Beetle*. The big fellow spat blood, and wiped his lips with a torn gray sleeve.

"Your goose was nearly cooked," he mumbled briefly.

Twenty paces away, jumbled in a splintered heap, the *Beetle* was disappearing in sheets of flame that withered the leaves of the trees above. The trooper wiped black, oily soot from his face. His mouth had been mashed, teeth broken.

"What—" muttered Hammer.

He sat upright, fingering his left shin bone.

"Pulled the other guys out first," the trooper mumbled. "Thought you was a goner, too. Better not look. Poor Happy Rose, my buddy, wheel post drove clean through him."

"Tank caught fire?" asked Hammer, thinking more clearly.

Blackbird, blackbird, where had it flown? Blackbird hadn't got him yet!

"Didn't catch by herself," the trooper mouthed. "That demon came back. Lifted the money boxes out, one by one, and me laying like a dead man. He got it, sir. I'm sorry."

"Never mind that," said Hammer impatiently.

"I woke up to see him tossing matches into the spilling gasoline," said the trooper. "Couldn't get my gun."

He wiped a sleeve across his trembling mouth again. He was swaying on his knees.

"Where's his ship?" demanded Hammer swiftly. "Where did he come down? He's somewhere around here now. Keep your eyes open, and watch out for the Blackbird!"

The big trooper's face had grown pale as lard. His head wobbled. He made a futile gesture to lift hand to lips.

"Can't do nothing, sir," he gasped. "Feel tired—"

He had tugged loose his pistol. He thrust it at arm's length. His hand described an unsteady circle as he banged away. Lead crashed through crisp, sere foliage overhead, through splintering saplings, against rocks on the ground, summoning help, summoning Cedar Rudd, who heard the crazy shooting as he stood with Officer Amsel, by the Iron Mine police cabin in the grassy glade nearby.

"**BLACKBIRD!**" Captain Hammer was muttering. "Damned murdering Blackbird! I know you're watching me, Blackbird! I can feel your sharp eyes—"

"You just rest easy, sonny," Cedar advised patiently. "You're in the police cabin of the Iron Mine District. Ain't nothing going to hurt you here."

Aided by the big trooper with the mashed face, Cedar had carried Hammer into the nearby police cabin. Amsel was gone, galloping off on Cedar's white mule, to fetch the police surgeon, who was with the cordon of officers gathered about the Iron Mine District.

"Hope I'm not making too much trouble," muttered Hammer.

His pale eyes moved restlessly. His wide lips were set in an attempt to smile. His head seemed to be rocking, like a cracked bell. He lay on his back, fists clenched on his breast; he was counting the cobwebs that dangled from the low raftered ceiling.

"Your Blackbird won't get away," promised Cedar. "The whole district's guarded by men who know the woods, and there ain't nothing that creeps or crawls going to get by them."

"That won't hinder the Blackbird, Sergeant," said Hammer, with a sudden laugh.

"He come down, didn't he?" argued Cedar sensibly. "And he ain't gone up again. As you tell me, he needs a smooth clearing to fly off from. But there ain't no stump-free fields in all this neck of the woods. Take my word

for it, I know every inch of 'em."

"He's a sly one, I tell you," insisted Hammer. "Watch out!"

"He's down, with his plane," said Cedar. "No place in the woods for him to hide. We'll have him and his plane inside an hour, along with the sixty grand in gold he's stole."

"Damn it, the air's stuffy in this place!" said Hammer, trying to sit up on Officer Amsel's bunk. "Something makes me feel queer. Where did you say I am?"

"You got a compound fracture, fierce enough to make anybody feel queer," said Cedar. "Besides which, you took a bump on your head, that'd have cracked a cannon ball. The surgeon'll be coming soon."

"Somebody's gone to get him?"

"Yea, the Iron Mine officer hisself hopped on old Snowball and went tearing off like mad," said Cedar, "when he seen us carrying you out of the woods. He ought to be back by now. But he's a kinda tenderfoot yet, just joined up with the force and new to the woods, so maybe he lost his bearings."

Hammer sank back, His broad brow was all a-sweat, but he tried to grin.

"Blackbird's watching me!" he whispered. "Can't fool me. I know, I know—"

Cedar Rudd sat there, watching and listening, while the injured man, muttering more vaguely, tossed off to sleep. Cedar arose quietly. He had heard a rustle in the grass outside the cabin's rear window.

He knew the whispers of the wilderness, the sly tracks and furtive scents of its teeming, invisible denizens. For a moment he stood, alert. He stepped out of the door with the sinewy lightness and the silence of a wolf.

On the stoop the huge trooper was sitting, rocking his head back and forth, with hands clasped to his mouth. Cedar leaped down, clapping a friendly hand on the trooper's shoulder, as he passed. Swiftly he went around the cabin to the rear window.

No one was there. Cedar's nostrils

quivered. Casting a glance on the dank, grass covered soil, he pushed straight through a patch of breast high sumac and sere goldenrod, emerging on a dump and ash heap behind the cabin. There he found Officer Amsel, squatting on his hams, diligently applying a match to a pile of paper refuse and garbage. Though Cedar had made no sound, Amsel swung around on his heels. Crouching, he turned up a quick bright glance at Cedar, shaking the black hair away from his forehead.

"When the devil did you come back?" asked Cedar briefly. "Why didn't you report?"

"That damned big brute of yours threw me," Amsel snarled. "I'd sooner ride a greased pig. Laugh at me—I knew you would."

"Poor old Snowball threw you?" Cedar grinned. "Why, he hasn't got a buck in all his fat hide. You must have bounced yourself off, Amsel. Where's the mule gone?"

"He kicked up his heels and left me flat on the trail," Amsel complained bitterly. "He almost broke my back."

Cedar pressed aside the undergrowth and looked out on the level glade that extended from the cabin. At its far end, three hundred yards away, he spied the fat mule, browsing placidly on short grass.

"Snowball's all right, so long as he doesn't tumble down the old mine shaft," said Cedar, chuckling as he turned back to Amsel. "And the old mule's got too much sense to go exploring in such places, which is more than can be said for some humans. Did you get hold of the surgeon, Amsel?"

"On his way," snarled Amsel.

He had grown sullen at Cedar's laughter. His sharp face wore a malicious look.

"I got two casualties parked at your cabin," said Cedar easily. "The other two poor birds that was in the wreck are a job for the coroner. They never knew what hit 'em. Keep your gun handy, Amsel, for the dirty crook that did it."

He's hiding somewhere in the woods now, and it's sure he wouldn't stick a minute at drilling any one of us through the back."

"I'm not worrying," said Amsel darkly.

"Maybe you're not the worrying sort," said Cedar gently. "But I've got only one hide on my bones, and I aim to keep it whole. I got my eyes open, and I ain't going to give this killer a chance. I don't mind saying that if he tries to spit at me he's spitting at a rattler."

Hands on hips, Cedar scanned the forest with narrow green eyes. The woods stirred. The wind made a rustling whisper. Amsel shrugged contemptuously. He leaned over and spat into the bonfire.

"He's flown a million miles away by now," said Amsel. "You'll never catch him."

"I'll bet you my socks I do," said Cedar grimly.

"I don't want your filthy socks!" snarled Amsel.

"You ain't going to get them," said Cedar.

He turned and pushed through the high weeds. Then, with a sudden thought, he retraced his steps quietly. Amsel was still crouched before the bonfire, his glance moody, his lips sucked in.

"This guy, Hammer, keeps muttering and mumbling something about a black-bird," said Cedar. "Sounds like he's off his nut. Did he strike you that way, when you was watching him through the rear window?"

Amsel darted up a look with bright black eyes. His lean fingers clenched on his knees. A lump moved in his throat.

"Are you accusing me of spying?" he whispered.

"Hell, Amsel, your tracks was all over the grass," said Cedar wearily. "Why didn't you come in—afraid of me giving you the razz because Snowball threw you? Got such a thin skin you can't take a kidding like a man?"

Amsel gripped his knees with hooking fingers. The lank strands of hair had fallen again over his eyes. He squatted like a bird upon a limb. His face seemed

folded inward; only a thin sharp beak, only black eyes showing. He picked up a stick and poked at the bonfire.

"You're a funny duck," said Cedar kindly, laying a leathery hand on Amsel's shoulder. "Don't mind my joking ways. You and me've got different temperaments, I can see. But we wear the same uniform, and that ought to make us buddies."

Amsel blew upon the fire. A sheaf of black smoke rose from it, dancing with sparks. A gust blew it into Amsel's face. He was like a bird upon a branch, that shivers when the wind blows.

THE HOLD-UP of the *Gold Beetle* was not the only crime that was carried out in the next few days. On that same night, for instance, down in Tuxedo, fifteen miles away, a rich man's summer mansion was glutted of a treasure in old paintings and hand fashioned silver dinnerware, three times as precious—were the thief able to dispose of it at market price—as the treasure taken from the *Beetle*. The thief, or at least an accomplice, was immediately arrested, however. The mystery was a question, so far as the local police saw it, of how the loot had been carried away without trace.

It was a curious incident. The mansion, standing in a great park of lawns, and surrounded by a twelve foot iron fence, could be reached only by one road, and that a steep winding mountain road, whose few inhabitants were accustomed to observing each car that panted up the grade to the gates. The house was in the process of being closed for the winter. An employee of a New York art gallery had been commissioned to pack up the valuables and ship them to the city.

In the evening, when he retired, after drinking some applejack to protect him against the keen October night, the tall iron gates were locked, according to his story, and no marks of vehicles furrowed the long, smooth, newly tamped gravel road that led from the gates to the mansion house.

In the morning, when he awoke, the

gates were still locked, and no track of any wheel passed below them. Nor was there any one upon the road approaching the estate who had heard a car go up or down. Yet wheel tracks ran half-way up the graveled road inside the grounds, cutting straight along the center of it, and suddenly ending in nothingness.

From the house, the collection of valuables, weighing several hundred pounds, had curiously vanished. The caretaker was immediately arrested, of course, when it was found that he had a police record, and was put in a place where things were made so warm that he had no need of applejack. Nor did he help his case a whit by saying that he had half aroused from slumber, when the moon was shining, to behold out of his bedroom window a vast black bird soaring away over the tall fence, humming a little song as it went. Such are the visions which spring from applejack drunk in October.

"It's not right; it's not right!" complained the suspect, failing to realize, no doubt, that there are many things not right in this old world that men must, nevertheless, stomach. "Here, I've got a wife and kids, and been going as straight as a string for seven years. Would I be such a boob? Let me out of here!" he screeched. "Let me go home to my kids!"

But he was caught and put behind solid hoosegow bars.

The next night there was a robbery over near Tarrytown, down across the Hudson—a safe tin-canned open and a watchman knifed in the groin when he had come upon something unexpectedly in the dark.

THE AFTERNOON two days after the *Beetle's* crash, Sergeant Cedar Rudd came riding merrily on his fat, white mule over the ridge trail from Iron Mine to Bitter Lake. The woods lay beneath mellow Indian summer sunlight. The air was clean and crisp, and a hawk soared high in it for the pure joy of flying.

"I'm going to get you, old fellow," said Cedar to himself, eying the speck of bird.

Cedar Rudd had just broken—or

rather, emptied—a bottle of Irish whisky with Officer Amsel. It was a gift sent him by Captain Hammer from New York. His glance was bright, his smile confused; his stomach felt warm and rosy. Hammer had written him:

Here is a little gift of bottled sunshine for you and the Iron Mine officer. I am sorry I didn't see him. The doctors have me flat now, and I'll have to shoot them or marry my nurse to get away. The blackbird is still in the hills, I'm convinced. It's a beautiful hiding place for him. I shan't be able to sleep easily till I've run him to ground. Watch out for him—and keep your gun handy. He's a killer.

"This is right nice of Captain Hammer," said Cedar, letting Amsel read the letter, while he poured out a drink. "Particularly, remembering you, whom he's never seen."

"Oh, we may have met before," said Amsel softly. "Who knows?"

"You've got to meet him, if he comes up here again."

"Yes," said Amsel, "I'll give him a reception."

"Well, bottoms up!" said Cedar. "The way we used to do in the old Marines. What'll we drink to?"

"May the Blackbird soar high!" said Amsel.

"Yea!" roared Cedar, downing his glass. "May he soar at the end of a rope necktie ten feet off the ground."

Now the warmth of this pleasant bottle still lingered with Cedar, as he came over the Ridge. The forest about him bore its quiet autumnal look. Rain had fallen in the early morning; the ground was still wet; and little lizards, scarlet as hot flame, revelled among dank leaves underfoot. As Cedar bounced along on Snowball, he burst into song. It was not a particularly nice song, but it had plenty of volume and went rolling over the hills like thunder.

"My mammy was a wall-eyed goat;
My old man was an ass,
And I feed myself off leather boots
And dynamite and grass.
For I'm a mule, a long-eared fool,
And I ain't never been to school.
Mammee! Ma-ha-ha-mam-hee!
Hee-haw! Mam-maw!
Ma-ham-mee!

"My old man belonged to the Horse Marines;
My mammy was a donkey,
And when they saw the bouncing boy
They called me Hunkey-Tunkey.
For I'm a mule, a long-eared fool,
And I ain't never been to school—

"Join the chorus, Snowball!" he urged,
slapping the fat mule's neck.
And Snowball did.

"Mammee! Ma-ha-ha-mam-hee!
Hee-haw! Mam-maw!
Ma-ham-mee!"

Cedar had progressed a mile from the Iron Mine police cabin. He came to the summit of the ridge. Three miles straight ahead he could see a sector of waters sparkling on Bitter Lake, with his own cabin, like a wren's house, on the rocky shore. He paused and lighted a cigaret.

Across the trail, almost beneath the nose of Snowball, a ferret came leaping in long russet curves, made careless by Cedar's posture of immobility. Little ears alert and pointed, cruel teeth gleaming, it paused, looked up and saw him, then fled. Cedar jerked out his pistol and snapped a shot. Instantly he swung to the ground and plunged after. The flashing beast was disappearing into the tangled face of an earth embankment, leaving a trail of tiny blood drops, like rubies on the brown leaves.

Cedar had shot instinctively; in the cheerfulness of his mood. Now he was sorry of his act. He could not leave the fierce little killer wounded, to perish with lingering pain. He followed swiftly, tore aside an armful of creepers from the embankment and peered through.

He had uncovered the mouth of an old horizontal mine shaft, doubtless similar to the one that lay near the Iron Mine cabin. From these rude mines had once been delved metal for the cannons that defended Fort Montgomery and West Point against the Hessian cattle. The ferret's crimson trail disappeared across the threshold of the mine. Bending below the decaying crosspiece, Cedar inched his way cautiously within.

The shaft was about five feet high, six wide, and of a depth unknown. Rotten logs, corduroyed across the floor, oozed like mush beneath his tread. There struck him the dank exhalation of rotting vegetation, of termite-weeviled wood, of deep hidden waters, stagnant with the corruption of a hundred years. Clots of earth dropped on him from the cobwebbed roof. The flooring trembled.

Something splashed into an unseen pool. Inch by inch Cedar felt his way inward. His nostrils flattened at the odor. He trod lightly, and he was rapidly growing sober.

He should not venture here. No, he knew the hills too well, and the treachery of such rotten holes. This was a trap, a tomb, a place of burial and blind drowning. Amsel had tried it at the Iron Mine shaft. And pushing a wheelbarrow, too. There had been those wheelmarks on the grass. But Amsel was not a woodsman. He had not learned the forest's dismal secrets.

Cedar Rudd shook his head. He must warn Amsel again.

Glimmering in the dim light from the shaft's mouth, the eyes of an animal burned cold green upon Cedar. He instantly leveled his pistol and shot. Echoes shrieked and earth rumbled.

"Almighty God!" he shouted.

There, in the blackness, he let out that despairing cry. He had felt the flooring cave beneath him. It tumbled down to hidden waters. Desperately he leaped. Where he had stood there was nothing.

Still the log ribbed floor rumbled and trembled, breaking under his scrambling feet. In huge clots the roof was falling, blocking him off from day. With hunched shoulders, he plunged along that caving floor and fell headlong over the entrance. Below his feet yawned emptiness; he lay over the lip of the gulf. Clutching at roots, he pulled himself forth on his belly.

He got himself to his shaking knees and arose. A moment later he drubbed his heels against Snowball's smooth, bulging flanks. At a furious gallop he left that dismal place behind him.

"I've got to warn Amsel again," he thought. "That's what'll happen to him, if he don't watch out."

STABLING his white mule on the shore of Bitter Lake, Cedar heard a plane droning over the hills. He sought cover on the shore and watched it narrowly, being by no means sure that it was not the Blackbird.

A gray seaplane, smaller by half than the *Beetle*, was sailing down from the east into the valley that cupped the lake. It came, turning into the wind, and settled its tail in the water. Its bow swung round; it churned toward the farther shore and beached in the shallows below Cedar's cabin. When its engine was silenced, across the still, clear waters of the lake, Cedar heard a voice calling him.

"Oh, Sergeant Rudd! Oh, Sergeant!"

It was the voice of Captain Hammer. Cedar climbed into a flat bottomed boat and pulled himself across the half mile expanse. Hammer's round head, completely turbaned with hospital gauze, except for one little topknot of yellow hair, leaned out of the control cockpit. His wide mouth was twitching humorously.

"Hello," Cedar greeted him, pulling up alongside and resting on his oars. "I thought you was in hospital."

"I had to promise to take my nurse, poor wild lady, to Bermuda, before I could get away," Hammer grinned. "Wonder if she's still waiting for me on the dock. Here, I've brought you up some more liquid dynamite."

"Thanks," said Cedar feelingly. "That last you sent nearly wrecked me."

He took the bottle. He felt glad to see Hammer's confident face. A premonition had been with him all day that the Blackbird was nearer than he knew. Yet he had searched the woods thoroughly for both man and ship, two days steadily.

"You haven't any business around here," he chided Hammer. "That there left leg of yours looks like a roll of canvas tenting."

"It's in plaster," Hammer admitted. "But I've got a good right one to kick the

rudder bar. What traces have you found of the Blackbird?"

Cedar dabbled his oars in the water. He shook his head, scowling.

"Tracks was all so mixed up around the wreck," he apologized. "All I can say is I've combed Iron Mine high and low, from Boggy Swamp to Bear Hollow, and there ain't a clear, level field where the black ship could have landed."

"There must be," said Hammer shortly. "You missed it, that's all."

Cedar flushed.

"I don't miss much," he said.

"The Blackbird came to ground," said Hammer grimly.

"I was talking it over with the Iron Mine officer," suggested Cedar. "He thought maybe Blackbird never landed at all, but only parked the blackbird airplane up above the trees, and climbed down a rope ladder."

Captain Hammer burst into shouts of laughter.

"You make my head ache," he choked. "That officer must be a prize ninny. I'm afraid he doesn't know much about the air."

"Well, we're not supposed to," Cedar pointed out.

"I'm going up to find the Blackbird's nest," said Hammer. "Come along. I'll show you a new view of your hills, Sergeant."

"No, thanks!" Cedar declined.

"There's no danger," Hammer explained with a grim smile. "I can always find a lake to drop on, if the engine fails."

"No, thank you kindly, and much obliged!" Cedar declined again with feeling. "I don't aim to do any dropping, on land or water. I know too much about them things."

"The Blackbird's lying low somewhere in the hills," said Hammer, with a speculative tightening of his wide gray eyes. "That's his game. If he once came out in the open at any known air field, that funny little monoplane of his would be spotted immediately. But in the hills he seems to be safe. Somehow, he's managed to make himself invisible to you

—I don't know how. But he can't hide away from me in the air."

"Aiming to give him a fight?" demanded Cedar.

"Not today," said Hammer dryly. "This is no stunter. The Blackbird has one of these new German ships, quick as a shadow, with a quiet little engine packed with power. The Germans have learned new tricks out of their glider experience. That black ship could cut rings around the HS, and butcher me. All I want to do this time is to uncover his nest. Then you'll see me come scooting back, like a scared loon with a hawk on its tail."

"Speaking of hawks, I spotted a boy over the Ridge that I aim to go gunning for," commented Cedar. "Ain't you afraid the Blackbird'll catch you?"

"His ship is hidden away on the ground," said Hammer. "By the time he could break it out, start his engine and climb into the air, I'd be far on my way to New York. He doesn't know I'm coming, you see. That's the only thing that saves me."

"His not expecting you?"

Hammer nodded.

"I'd better tell the Iron Mine officer to be on the lookout," said Cedar Rudd.

"That might be a good idea," said Hammer.

CEDAR looked up across the ridge. The autumnal sun was falling over that black hump. Already shadows had begun to creep into the valley of Bitter Lake.

"Who is the Blackbird?" he asked.

Hammer closed his lips grimly.

"It's something we don't like to talk about," he said shortly.

"I don't want to know anything personal," said Cedar.

"There was a combat squadron over across nine years ago," said Hammer, leaning over the side of the boat and lowering his voice, "that had a thief in it. Officers' rooms would be broken into, mail stolen—all that sort of thing. It got to be a frightful scandal. A man

wasn't able to keep a fountain pen or a pair of new shoes. Why, the adjutant had his watch lifted from him right in officers' mess, when he was dining with the C. O.—What's the matter, Sergeant?"

"Doggone! Must have lost my own watch," exclaimed Cedar, digging anxiously through his pockets. "I had it today, I remember. Probably dropped it out in the old mine hole."

"Have you lost your police badge?" asked Hammer ironically.

"No, I still got it."

"Then you probably haven't met the Blackbird," said Hammer. "He wouldn't leave you the toenails on your feet."

"One of your own brother officers?" asked Cedar. "To think of your own brother officer doing that to you!"

Hammer nodded.

"A brother officer, recommended for the Service by three eminent Congressmen, sworn in and trained with the rest of us, sharing mess and flying with us," he said bitterly. "We don't like to have it talked about, even now. Yet it wasn't thieving only, Sergeant, that the Blackbird was up to. He was up to murder."

"We were losing men and ships right and left those days, and in a damned queer way. The C. O. came down one day and reported he'd been flying with two others in the cloud, and suddenly both of them had just vanished before his eyes. Gone away like smoke. Other outfits got to calling us the Infant Mortality Squadron. There were youngsters with not twenty hours' flying time credited in their books, who were shot down when no enemy ships were reported in the air. When I get to thinking of the fine young boys who went west—drilled in the back, absolutely slaughtered! We got to wondering if the Germans had invented some new soundproof motor, that our detectors didn't catch, and a camouflage to turn their ships invisible. It was like fighting a squadron of pale ghosts. We'd go up and stab at emptiness, or we wouldn't come back at all. The C. O. reported he'd seen a ship like mist—"

"One of your own flyers was a traitor?" demanded Cedar, shaking his head. "He was shooting you in the back?"

"Easy enough to see now," said Hammer quietly, "but it wasn't so simple then. You have faith in the men wearing your uniform, the men who are fighting beside you, sharing chow and spilling blood with you. They're above suspicion. You'd trust them to the last ditch."

Cedar Rudd nodded thoughtfully.

"It's the same in any service, I suppose," he said. "It's got to be.

"The C. O. was the only man in the outfit who hadn't got the willies over the whole mess," continued Hammer, pounding his fists on the cockpit rim. "He was a good flyer, one of our best. He always managed to come back untouched, though many a time the young fellows with him never turned up again. He was a little, black eyed fellow; I remember him, with a sharp yellowish nose, dark hair tumbling down into his eyes—looked like a blackbird, even. He wasn't particularly well liked. Had the reputation of being nasty and sullen. But he was one of us. He wore the uniform, you see."

"The Blackbird!" snarled Cedar. "Your own commanding officer!"

Hammer shrugged.

"It wasn't nice," he admitted.

"And you mean to say this fiend is still alive?" growled Cedar.

"One peculiarity I remember best about the Blackbird," Hammer said coolly, "and that is, he always flew with his left wing down. Only flyer in the world, I suppose, who'd do it. Four men out of five will drag the right wing, to counteract torque and save the push on the rudder—the fifth man will fly level. But the Blackbird had that streak of crookedness by which you could spot him a mile off in the air—left wing down. The black ship that downed the *Beetle* was dragging its left wing," concluded Hammer. "It gave me the creeps when I saw it."

"Couldn't be another fellow with the same trick?"

"It couldn't be another."

"Who was the Blackbird?" asked Cedar.

"The name he carried in the Service makes no difference," said Hammer. "It was the name of his American mother. He was really von Bernau, the cleverest spy in the German Intelligence, and one of their crack flyers. They'd court-martialed him and broken him as a combat officer, because of his sticky fingers; but they found use for him as a spy. He came over here, where his mother's people live, enlisted and went through our flying mill. No wonder he had a great training record—a German ace, with more air experience than most of the men who instructed him! He got his oak leaves—a major. And he was the fellow who drilled his own messmates and junior officers through the back."

"What happened to him?" demanded Cedar.

Hammer pinched his nose. A grin was fixed on his friendly mouth, but his eyes had the look of steel. He didn't reply.

"Did he get away with it?" insisted Cedar.

"He went up flying one day and didn't come back," said Hammer carefully. "When his trunks were opened, we found the evidence that he was the thief who'd been playing the devil with us. But the whole story was quieted down, for the honor of the outfit and his own good name."

"His own good name!" jeered Cedar.

"You're the first man who knows the Blackbird was anything more than a thief," explained Hammer quietly. "Others may have suspected, but they never knew. He was reported killed in the line of duty. His name is on a bronze memorial tablet in Cleveland or Buffalo, I believe, and many lovely ladies have wept their eyes out for him."

Hammer smiled more widely and lighted a cigaret.

"Well, let's go!" he said.

Cedar was not to be put off.

"What's the rest of the story?" he demanded keenly.

"Why, the rest of the story is that we lost no more ships," said Hammer.

"Come on!"

"Listen, Sergeant," said Hammer. "Suppose one of the Blackbird's outfit was flying alone one day. And he climbs out of a cloud in time to see this Blackbird, his own commanding officer, sitting on the tail of another ship of the squadron and shooting hell out of it. Then the Blackbird comes diving down on him, and they have a regular dog fight, up there where no one can see them. You know, they whistle and streak around each other. Give each other all they've got. Fight it out to a finish. Well, the Blackbird tumbles over into a fast spin, streaks down into the cloud, out of control, fire shooting from between his wings. You think it is the end of him, you know."

"I don't know," said Cedar, "but I can imagine."

"You think it is the end," said Hammer, "till you wake up out of a nap years later, four thousand miles away, and spot this deathless fiend blazing away at you in the air, with your pilot dead, and nothing you can do. Thank God he doesn't know you're in that big helpless tub, or you'd never crawl out of it alive. He'd nail you on the ground and crucify you, that damned Blackbird!"

"So you're the man who got him?" said Cedar, nodding.

"I haven't said so," protested Hammer quickly. "Maybe you've seen him shoot down one of the youngsters of the outfit, but you can't prove it. You can't prove he's von Bernau, either, and a filthy spy. He's your superior, and wearing your uniform. A court martial would call it murder. You'd hang if the word leaked out. Best keep your mouth shut. Say nothing about it."

Cedar Rudd nodded his head repeatedly. His lips were pressed together. He reached out and took the hand of Hammer.

"Don't you be afraid the Blackbird'll get you, boy," he said.

"He won't, if I see him first," grinned

Hammer, "but he's a killer, Sergeant. I say, watch out!"

"Good luck to you, boy," said Cedar.

CEDAR spun the propeller of the HS boat, with a sharp snap, and a quick jump away, as Hammer directed him. The loud engine yelled, the propeller blast tore up the surface of the lake. Cedar scrambled to shore and pushed the boat off, swinging it bow outward by one wing. Over the furrowing water it fled into the wind, while Cedar stood watching it a little while, saturated by the driven water of the propeller's wake.

He turned and left the shore, as he saw the boat leap off. He climbed up the slope to his cabin. The HS was turning round the woody shore, circling to gain altitude out of the valley. Cedar cranked his telephone, calling Amsel at Iron Mine.

"Sergeant speaking," he said. "I wanted to warn you again to stay away from them old mine shafts, Amsel."

Amsel made a formless sound.

"I didn't get that," said Cedar kindly. "Connection must be bad. What say?"

"Have you been snooping around here?" asked Amsel in a voice not much louder than a whisper. "What have you found?"

"I happened to think of it, 'cause I nearly got myself drowned in an old shaft up on the Ridge today," replied Cedar calmly.

"Don't worry about me," said Amsel in a louder, firmer voice. "I'm no such fool as to allow myself to be caught. I'll mind my own business, Sergeant, and thank you to mind yours."

"I suppose it's only your own fool business if you want to be buried alive," said Cedar, somewhat nettled. "Go ahead and make a meal of yourself for rattlesnakes and hoptods, in a hole deep underground. Lucky you're far enough away so I won't hear you hollering. It will be an awful thing, and I'm kind of squeamish, Amsel."

"Thanks, Sergeant," said Amsel grudgingly.

"I just had a visitor," said Cedar more cheerfully. "Captain Hammer came flying up in a boat by himself. He's started over your way now."

"What!" screamed Amsel.

"Hammer," explained Cedar patiently. "He thinks he can spot this blackbird plane from the air, wherever it's been hiding. You keep an eye on him and report to me. Be sure to keep me posted. Hey, Amsel, are you listening? Oh, Amsel!"

Cedar rang again. Something must have happened to the wire, for it was dead.

Cedar moved out to his porch, watching the sun go down. The HS was still circling, in widening sweeps, around the sides of the valley, mounting toward the pale sky above. Shadows lay upon the heavy woods which covered the slopes, and the smooth waters of Bitter Lake had taken on a look of blackness.

As the HS came over, in its last wide sweep, already four hundred feet above the cabin, Cedar cupped his hands and shouted up, unaware that above the engine roar all sounds were inaudible to Hammer.

"Come back and tell me what you find!" he bawled.

The HS leveled and drove westward toward the Ridge, toward the red heart of the sun. Hammer waved his hand over-side and was gone. It was a salute and a farewell.

Over the humpbacked Ridge the singing boat fled, like a wild goose on migration. And there, three miles away, Cedar Rudd thought he beheld another speck moving through the crimson air. The sun dazzled his eyes. He shook his head and blinked. Left wing down and right wing high, it came from the west—a speck, and nothing more.

Quickly Cedar stepped back into the cabin and pulled down his rifle from the wall. He had been laying for that hawk.

STEADILY Hammer circled out of the valley, till he was above the Bitter Lake watershed and could see other,

smaller spots of water glinting among the autumn woods. With enough altitude he might be fairly sure of finding himself all the time within gliding distance of a lake.

The terrain was new to him. Two days before, he had been caught in the bow hold of the *Gold Beetle*, as tight and quite as blind as a snail in a duck's gullet. He knew the *Beetle* had crashed somewhere west of Bitter Lake. He intended to locate the precise spot, by the fire blackened ground and the police cabin to which Cedar had carried him. From this point he would search in widening circles, till he had uncovered the Blackbird's lair.

There must be a lair; the Blackbird had come down. Though respecting Cedar Rudd's woods sense, Hammer knew the Blackbird had landed somewhere. Possibly this was a spot so well known to Cedar that he had not thought of it. The obvious is always most difficult to observe, even for a keen eyed woodsman.

In the twenty or thirty minutes following the *Beetle's* crash the Blackbird had landed, had visited the wreck more than once, carrying from it ten solid boxes, weighing twenty-five pounds each, and had finally returned to fire the wreck. His black plane, then, had been near. It was probable, from the dexterity and dispatch of the whole business, that the Blackbird had timed his attack precisely, had caused the *Beetle* to crash in a previously selected spot, where he might follow it and pick its bones. So Hammer reasoned.

He swung his heavy boat around, shooting straight for the low sun across the Ridge's saddle. Crisp wind burned his face. The engine was tuned to a beautiful, clear song. The body of the air was thick and smooth as honey. The mountains moved. He himself seemed to stand still in space above a creeping world.

As he dropped Bitter Lake astern and the hump of the mountain rose below, he searched the farther slope for a lake. He could not venture too far from water.

Should the HS crash on land in the deep forest, her fate would be even worse than the *Beetle's*. His eyes settled on a little black spot of water ahead, beyond the Ridge, nestled deep in a somber hemlock forest, at the bottom of a cup of hills. It seemed not much bigger than a millpond, yet he was satisfied.

This kind of flying was more perilous than he would have admitted to Cedar, more perilous than he'd admit to himself. The HS was not a dexterous boat, and her natural clumsiness was complicated by his injured leg. He could swing her right without difficulty, but could negotiate a left turn only by pulling in the rudder bar with the point of his shoe—a ticklish business.

If the Blackbird should come on him unawares, in that swift, twisting, somersaulting little blackbird ship— Well, Hammer didn't like to think of what would happen.

"When I see you coming, Blackbird, you'll see me going," Hammer thought grimly. "But I'll be back, Blackbird, on something like even terms. Then we'll finish a certain argument, you and I."

Blackbird, Blackbird. Where was he hiding in those deep forested hills? Where was he flitting, what was he hunting? Blackbird! Hammer had crossed the Ridge.

He leaned overside, looking down. The direct horizon sun had momentarily dazzled his eyes.

The forest summit was two hundred feet below. He could make out the trail, brown and narrow, crossing over the saddle. Crests of trees stirred crimson and copper and yellow, a restless ocean of painted waves tossing in the wind. And lifting swiftly from below, swooping up like a dismal shadow or like a bat from Tartarus, its narrow wings climbing fast and bullet nose up-pointed, there came the black ship with the blackbird in it, like a man in a coffin!

Hammer gasped a word that was a prayer, and set his teeth, for he knew that his hour was on him.

IT HAPPENED with a speed approaching that of lightning. Time moves swiftly in the air. It is no place to float and cogitate.

The black ship shot up toward his bow. He could not climb away. He hauled her nose high, but she would not take the air. She rolled and toppled over to one side, like a terror stiffened horse hearing a rattler's *klirr* underfoot.

The blackbird zoomed with streaking wings. It leaped like a rocket. Level, its black wings swept by the gray boat at three hundred feet a second. Hammer tried to hook their wings together as they passed, but the black ship was too fast. The motor of the HS roared in spasms. All else was taut silence. Hammer bit his lips and snarled. It was not fair.

Around on the boat's tail, the black ship whipped with pinwheel speed, heading parallel with Hammer and above him. Its dragging left wing drifted just over the top wing of the flying boat.

Instinctively Hammer cowered, caught in the wide, open cockpit, like a bird in a cage. Blackbird pressed his control stick between his knees. He lifted up his rifle. He moved calmly and methodically, and with certain pleasure, in this thing he was to do. It was a shot at ten paces. A blind man could not miss.

All Hammer's body was stone. *Hroom-hroom!* His engine roared. The boat was like a log in his hands, rolling slow. Time passed forever. Blackbird, Blackbird had him now!

"Hand out the pepper, Blackbird! Come on! Come on!" screamed Hammer, not hearing his own cry.

That paralysis of terror dropped from Hammer almost instantly. It was not in his nature to lie down. He would not perish like a torn pigeon, moaning and fluttering in the claws of the eagle. He'd take this thing fighting. His life was worth a price. If this was death, let it come. But let it not come cowardly.

"Come on! Come on!" he shouted.

And Blackbird, looking down, eyes set and bright behind his owlish goggles, must have been surprised to see Hammer

laughing! Though he must feel the Blackbird's claws, yet the Blackbird would feel his beak.

"Give me the pepper, Blackbird, and I'll give you dynamite!"

His one hope was not to get away, for he had no hope of that, but to hook and entangle the black ship's wings, to hook the swift fiend in mid-air and crumple him up! Wings locked, hull swinging over to batter landing gear, grapple and wrestle that Blackbird to his death! Laugh into his face as they both spin down to burn. Nail him! Smash him like a matchbox in the air!

Hammer jammed his weight on the rudder, clutched the wheel to his breast. The heavy HS streaked over, perpendicular to earth and sky, like an ax blade on the swing. A great three ton knife, a swishing cleaver, it hooked toward the darting little black ship, with the speed of centrifugal force.

Hammer's ears were deafened. Sky and mountaintop whipped round. He tensed himself for the crash. Still he was laughing.

"The fireworks! The fireworks! Hear them bicker and rattle!"

The Blackbird had blazed away. *Br-rup! Br-rup! Rup-rup-rup!*

The blackbird streaked up, looping out of Hammer's reach. The bow of the HS falling heavily in a sideslip, at the butt of its swing, missed the black ship's tail by inches. Over on his back, the Blackbird whizzed in a quick swoop, and dropped down again on the tail of the HS. He had been aware of the nearness of that blow. He would be more wary now. He'd take no more chances.

Again he used his rifle. *Br-rup! Br-rup!* The engine of the HS began to spin with a sudden jerking roar. She shook herself like a wet dog, the whole boat thundering and trembling, threatening to tear her engine from its bed and break apart in mid-air. Her nose dived down toward the mountain top. The crash behind Hammer told him that the propeller had been shattered. Whirling

segments of it, fast to the hub, had set up that shuddering vibration.

She had flown her last mile. Down she dived with augmenting speed. Hard on her tail came the Blackbird, sieving wings and hull with his insistent and deathly drumming.

Momentarily the engine mass itself shielded Hammer from the fire. He snapped shut the switch, halting the wild shuddering. Down the steep gradient of the mountainside he shot headlong, pointed for the black spot of water that he had marked before. Could he make it? Desperately he cast a look behind at the little shadow ship on his tail.

Wavering crests of interlocked trees passed in a blur below the streaking keel. The keel flicked them, tearing through crisp branches like a thunderbolt. Black water rose toward her, somber and still within its circling hemlocks, touched by no light of the departing sun.

The wires of the flying boat screamed a high sharp song. Keen wind ripped at Hammer's face.

The Blackbird streaked out above. He did not care to follow the slope down so closely. Straight down he stared, easing his rifle overside. He took a steady bead. Hammer jerked his head. He felt a streak like fire across his cheek.

The black water rushed up, leaped up. No time to halt the boat's wild plunge, to stall her, and pancake down. Swift on her forward keel she struck the water with a crack, and shot across it like an arrow.

Desperately Hammer tugged her wheel against his breast, ruddering right. The shore, crowned by dismal forest giants, sunless, cavernous, vast, loomed before her hurtling bow. All was a rushing blur. She plowed to right, with a skidding motion, and careened, as her rudder began to pull her. Her wing pontoon dropped down to drag the water. But she had too much speed on her. She struck the rocky shore at an oblique and dashed her length up it, splintering and ripping to matchwood, as if a mountain had fallen on her.

Steep into the pit of the valley the Blackbird descended in close spirals. When he was not more than a hundred feet over the dark water, he leveled off, setting his controls in a tight, steady turn. He gripped the stick between his knees. Round above the wreck he wheeled.

Hammer crouched helplessly in the ruins.

It was marvelous flying, more cunning and more precise than any wild somersaulting in high air. Like a top upon a solid pivot, he turned and turned, each time as he passed over opening up with his rifle. At the fourth time passing, he hit the gasoline tank of the wreck, and it blew up.

FACE down on moist earth Hammer lay. He heard the Blackbird swinging over in that tight circle, wings 45° to the pond surface, riding the inside rim of an invisible air cone. The quiet engine droned with the steadiness of a bumblebee and scarcely louder, never varying its soporific note.

It was *buzz-buzz-buzz*—then *br-rup!* as the black plane came around in its orbit, and *buzz-buzz* again, circling away. Hammer lay quiet under the withered, crispy leaves of an oak scrub, between a cleft formed by two lichen covered shore boulders. Water lapped near his feet. For the instant, he hoped, the Blackbird's bright eyes had not penetrated to his hiding place, but believed him still in the wrecked plane.

Twice, pinned in the smashed cockpit, he had crouched beneath the withering fire. Blood was running down his cheek to his lips, from a fresh wound or from the pinking he'd taken in the air, he did not know. He tried to wipe his lips and found, with painless surprise, that his right arm failed to move. Something in the shoulder burned. Inert as a log, he lay, scarcely breathing.

He began to crawl. His left leg was like a gravestone cemented to his hip, but he did not mind the hurt of it. A man will give a leg for his life.

Hammer went as a worm goes. His face was pressed against wet soil. He writhed and twisted his muscles. Thus, inch by inch, he crawled into the deeper woods, inch by inch away from the shore, away from the cup of sky where the dark shadow of the blackbird pivoted.

A fourth time the blackbird came around, and the wreck of the HS went up in crimson thunder, roaring, seething and shooting vast fiery sheets to heaven and over the face of the shore.

The blackbird zoomed high above the leaping tentacles of that flame. Three hundred feet above the dark water, the swaying hemlocks, the streaking fire, his deft ship careened with zigzagging wings, doing a devil's dance on the wind. Suddenly he straightened out, cut his engine, came diving down in a huge dismal silence. And Hammer, lying as motionless as a rock, knew the Blackbird's eyes were searching for him. The Blackbird had guessed that he'd got away from the plane.

"I see you!" shouted the Blackbird in that vast silence. "I see you!" he screamed in an excess of rage.

Empty words. The Blackbird opened up his droning engine again, for his ship was losing flying speed. Round he circled, and came shadowing quickly along the shore.

Through the woods, slowly and repeatedly, Hammer felt those bright black eyes, those sharp rapacious eyes, searching for him, with a merciless intensity, which, it seemed, would pierce the forest and lay him bare.

He wormed his way along. His breath panted. He was lathered with sweat. Deep in the wood, he got up and tried to run.

Again the Blackbird streaked high, zooming over the forest. He sprayed a rifle clip down at random, a farewell gesture or a threat. The mark was uncannily close to Hammer. Steel glanced from boulders. The forest barked, barked in echo. Unseen over the roof of trees, the black ship drummed away. There was silence.

HAMMER stumbled forth upon a narrow rocky trail. He dropped and lay on the earth a moment, gaining strength. Where there was a trail there would be men. Perhaps even the police officer at Iron Mine—he could not be far away.

A faint hope came to him, as he listened to the deep silence, that the Blackbird had forgotten him. Yet slowly there grew in him the realization of what the Blackbird's departure must betoken. Somewhere near at hand was the Blackbird's nest. He was coming down in it. On foot, quick and sly, he would hurry through the woods. Their meeting, Hammer knew, would be far more dreadful than death in the air.

"Help!" Hammer shouted. "Come and help me! Come and help me!"

His voice died away in imperishable solitudes. There was no answer but the whispering of wind in the leafy canopy and the lapping of water on the shore.

Where was he stalking, where creeping, that sly Blackbird with the bright eyes? Hammer lifted up his shoulders, scanning the wilderness depths. He had an uncanny sense that the Blackbird was near, was watching his tortuous struggles with malignant and silent laughter, delaying the dreadful hour. Whispers, whispers, whispers in the woods! Leaves rustling, bushes stirring.

"All right, come out! I know you're there!" gasped Hammer. "Let's make an end of it!"

He pushed aside a bush; but no skulking, armed figure was behind it. He had been deceived. He found a lean springy maple sapling with smooth trunk. With a stone he cracked it off and broke the forked branches from it. He set the fork beneath his armpit like a crutch. Slowly he hobbled. A step. A pause for breath, while he counted five. Another step.

He must make haste, put all his strength to this. Where was the Blackbird? Hope surged fiercely in him again. Yet every muscle of his body was straining, and exhaustion was gathering on him

like a palsy. Where was the Blackbird? He came to a branching of the path; there was a trail ahead, a trail to the left. The latter, though he could not know it, led up over the saddle of the Ridge, across four miles of steep mountain going to Bitter Lake.

Hammer paused, not knowing which to choose. Guided by an evil star, he moved ahead, taking the short straight trail to Amsel's cabin beside the clearing of Iron Mine.

Again, in the graying twilight, the Blackbird came buzzing over, skimming the forest top. He had not yet come to ground. Hammer pressed back against the trunk of a tree while the Blackbird swept by.

Hammer found the Iron Mine police cabin quite unawares, after a slow, creeping trek that had seemed everlasting. Yet the distance from the shore of the pond had been less than a half mile—as the crow flies, as the blackbird flies.

He beheld the cabin roof as he came through the forest. A faint tracery of smoke was coiling from the chimney. He croaked a hoarse cry. He tried to hasten, swinging along unsparingly, straining and half sobbing. He could see the slab front of it now, and shadows creeping on smooth grass before the door. Through the evening stillness came the cheerful tinkle of the telephone bell, ringing—*ting—ta-ta-ta—ting—ta-ta-ta!*

"Hello, there!" Hammer croaked. "Anybody home?"

No answer.

"Hello, Officer!" he called. "Lend me a hand, Officer!"

No answer. Shadows lay motionless in front of the cabin door. The chimney smoke coiled in a pallid wisp. If there was a living man about, he was silent as a bird.

Ting—ta-ta-ta! The telephone within the dark cabin rang again. *Ting—ta-ta-ta!* Like a snake's warning.

"Are you there, Officer?" panted Hammer.

Suddenly he was very tired. A faint trembling came over him, the climax of

fatigue. He was safe now. He wanted to lie down and rest.

"I'm a friend of Sergeant Rudd, Officer!" he said. "Hammer—the man you went to fetch the surgeon for. Are you awake?"

He hobbled to the threshold of the open door, and swung across it into the graying cabin. He remembered vaguely the look of it, as he had seen it in half-consciousness. No one was there now.

Katydid chirping through the blackening wilderness. All through the vast whispering woods they were creaking. *Crickety-crick! Crickety-crickety! Crickety-crick!* Suddenly Hammer felt afraid. An oppression, a closeness of air creeping over this place, such as he had noted before, seemed to stifle him. He did not like it. No, he did not like it.

He swung himself to the clamoring telephone, in haste to summon help. The instrument's irritant crackle dinned against his ear. He jammed the hook up and down. Faintly a voice broke in upon him, the voice of Cedar Rudd at Bitter Lake, four miles away.

"Hello, hello!" Cedar was calling. "Hello Iron Mine! Where the devil have you been? I've been trying for you the past hour! Hello, hello! What's all the trouble over there? Why haven't you reported? Damn it, man, can't you obey orders? Don't you know your business yet? Hello, Iron Mine? Hello!"

"This is Hammer at Iron Mine! Can you hear me? Can you hear me, Sergeant?"

"Hello, what's happened to Hammer? I can't hear you!"

"This is Hammer at Iron Mine!"

"Hello, hello! Hammer? Where is that damned patrol officer?" Cedar roared. "Yes, I can hear you now. Thank God, you're safe! How did you get there? I saw the Blackbird over the Ridge. I tried to wing him. But you're safe now?"

"I'm safe at the police cabin!" cried Hammer.

"Good!" cried Cedar. "I've been stirring up a hornet's nest at head-

quarters. Every man we have has been thrown around the Iron Mine District. They're beating through the woods. They'll reach you in an hour."

"An hour?" said Hammer.

"An hour—it shouldn't be more," said Cedar. "Where's the Iron Mine officer?"

"I don't know him! I haven't seen him!" cried Hammer.

"Look around for him, Captain Hammer. I'm afraid of foul play."

"What sort of a man is he?"

The voice of Cedar Rudd was fading out. Hammer did not quite catch the answer, if there was any. Rattling the hook up and down, he clung to the telephone as to a lifeline. No word came through.

Far away over the hills he thought he heard the sound of rifle fire, a shadow of a sound, a light drumming sound, borne on the gusty wind. *Br-rup—rup-rup!* It might have been only the sound of sere tree twigs, tapping and stirring on the cabin roof, as the wind moved.

"Hello, hello, Rudd! Is the Blackbird after you?"

He would not relinquish the telephone. He could scarcely breathe. That dismal suffocation still oppressed him. He cast his eyes around. No one was in the cabin, surely. His glance turned to an open window.

For a moment he stared, seeing nothing, as a man does when his thoughts are elsewhere. Then gradually his eyes focused. The look of the scene before him was beaten into his brain. From where he was standing, he had a clear view of the surrounding terrain. Hills lifted up to the sky. There were deep woods around. At the bottom of the hills, straight before the cabin window, stretched an open glade, nine hundred feet or more long, extending to a tangled cliff. Hammer could not mistake the look of it.

The glade was as level as still water. Walls of tall trees sheltered it from cross winds. It seemed to Hammer, standing there stiff with growing horror and amazement, that he could discern the

tracks of an airplane's wheels running up and down the glade. Yes, he could descry the faint acrid odor of dead gasoline. Not all the pungency of pines could quite drown it out, nor all the fresh winds of heaven quite wash it away.

The Blackbird's lair! Like a blind rabbit into a rattler's hole, he'd plunged headlong into it—into the nest of the Blackbird, caught and betrayed.

The receiver against Hammer's ear burst into crackling commotion, a racket like static electricity. Hammer called and called again, with sharp breathless cries, gripping the mouthpiece in locked fist. The voice of Cedar suddenly broke in on him.

"Blackbird just flew over! Heading back over the Ridge! Tell the Officer—"

"In the name of heaven, Rudd, here's where the Blackbird hides! Here at Iron Mine! Can you understand me? Can you understand me?"

Came the faint voice of Cedar Rudd, like the voice of a man from Mars, dim and cold and tiny, almost indistinguishable. It was astral distances away and remote beyond all helping.

"Can't get you—locate Amsel? Blackbird peppered me— I gave it to him—over the Ridge—"

Over the forest Hammer heard a quiet buzzing. It silenced, giving place to a sharp thin whine—the harp strumming of great wings, streaking down above the cabin roof.

He banged his fist on the telephone box, shouting over and over. He could raise no response. A dismal shadow streaked past the window, skimming swiftly to the sleek floor of the glade. Now it rolled upon the grass. Deft, narrow blackbird wings—and the Blackbird sitting above them, like a man within a coffin!

"Rudd! Rudd! The Blackbird's landed!"

Swiftly Hammer looked about him. There was no weapon, no place to hide, no place to run, had he been capable of running. He had nothing but his fists, and one of them was stiff and crippled by

a flesh wound in the shoulder. A last desperate hope was in him, and it was his only hope, that the Iron Mine officer, prowling through the woods, might observe the Blackbird descending and rush back to the cabin.

The voice of Cedar Rudd boomed suddenly, then faded to a whisper, to a cob-web rustling.

"Can't you find Officer Amsel?"

Something clicked in Hammer's mind. It was like a bright flash before his eyes. He could hope no more.

"Amsel!" he mouthed, his voice failing. Suddenly he broke into loud, wild laughter. "Amsel!" he choked. "Does he call himself that? Amsel! That means—Blackbird!"

The faint voice of Cedar Rudd did not come again.

There was a darting shadow at the cabin door, and Hammer heeled about, back to the wall, to face it manfully.

"Damn your black eyes!" he shouted.

THE BLACKBIRD rushed him at the door. He reeled, and caught up a chair, swinging it above his head. It crashed in full flight against the lintel, the Blackbird cowering and ducking aside, deftly.

"Come on! Come on!" shouted Hammer. "I'm here! You see me! Come on and fight it like a man!"

The Blackbird had disappeared around a corner of the doorway, quick and sly. Hammer picked up a pine bench, facing the entrance savagely. He lurched a step forward. There was no pain in his shoulder now. All his blood was thundering. Where was the Blackbird?

"Come on!" he roared. "You'll not drill me in the back!"

Suddenly he dropped flat to the floor, for he heard a rustle in the grass below the rear window. The sharp pointed face of the Blackbird appeared and flashed away—the yellowish, pointed nose; the black hair dropping over beady eyes.

The Blackbird carried his automatic rifle in the crook of his arm. That much

Hammer saw. He crawled breathlessly across the floor. Darkness had crept into the single room of the cabin, relieved only by the faint red glow of the cookstove in a corner. The Blackbird had been unable to see him. Hammer realized that the Blackbird was afraid, too, more afraid than he. Yet fearful men are desperate and do fiendish things.

He dragged himself silently to the far corner, where he commanded the doorway and was not to be seen from the rear window. Night was dropping on the world without. The long glade was already like ink. Surrounding trees had merged into a solid wall, rustling to the night wind, creaking with insects.

The hunted man tried to barricade himself behind the square cookstove, already growing cold, its wood embers dying; but the space between wall and stove was too narrow for him to squeeze into. His fingers felt about in the obscurity, creeping and reaching, hoping to touch on some missile. The Blackbird knew this cabin, and he did not. The air was thick and strangling. A pulse seemed beating in it.

Where was the Blackbird? Hammer breathed cautiously; his heart seemed to beat with a loud, constant ticking. Motes of blackness swam before his eyes. Suddenly he sensed that the Blackbird had crossed the threshold.

The Blackbird was within this narrow room, and creeping inch by inch upon him—crawling, with rifle pointed, with the deadly earnestness of a fanged snake. The squeak of a board, or the thunder of his heart might betray Hammer's whereabouts. The Blackbird, emerging from a greater darkness out of doors into this thick gloom, might be able to penetrate with bright eyes into the corner where Hammer crouched. Hammer's fingers still dribbled about the floor, searching for some weapon. Somewhere the Blackbird was slithering toward him in that awful, dark hush.

Now Hammer was crawling, pulling his broken leg after him; and the Blackbird was crawling, too, in the blind night.

There was no sound, no stir of breath.

Abruptly Hammer's dragging knee struck against a hollow object on the floor, tin pot or washbasin, and it rolled with a great empty banging. *Br-rup—rup-rup!* The rifle streaked instantly.

Hot flashes burst from a corner of the narrow darkness. Woodwork splintered with a *zing-zing-zing!* Bitter powder stench filled the thick air. Echoes shrieked, hammering with ear splitting fury from wall to wall. Hammer grasped the cookstove with both arms and heaved it over on its side. He fell behind it.

The heavy crash of the square iron box as it toppled over must have frightened the Blackbird, because for an instant his rifle spoke no more. Disjointed sections of stovepipe rattled loose and tumbled over the floor, bumping and thundering in uncanny commotion. Again the rifle racketed. Hammer cowered behind the stove. Steel smashed against the iron and streaked off with piercing screams.

Then came a moment of silence. Something clicked. The Blackbird was reloading his magazine.

"Come out and fight!" jeered Hammer, moistening his lips and speaking hoarsely. "Stand up, you skulking killer!" he cried. "Stand up, von Bernau, alias Amsel, alias the Blackbird! You'll not drill me in the back!"

For another moment the silence endured. Then from the hidden darkness came the Blackbird's sullen reply, stung to fury by Hammer's taunt.

"You know too much!" he spat.

There he was; there was the Blackbird, not ten feet away in the narrow room! Hammer had picked up a round stove lid. He hurled it like a discus at the voice. The rifle streaked fire at him. He crouched behind his barricade.

Once more the clamor perished. Again Hammer heard the katydids in the moonless night, again the whispering of night wind. Where was the Blackbird? No breath stirred in the heavy air, nor could Hammer's straining ears detect the least

rustle of the creeper. Yet, at any moment now the Blackbird would be on him. At any moment now that iron muzzle would prod into his breast, spitting fire on the hair trigger.

Hammer felt immobile and cold. He thrust his arms out slowly and cautiously, pressing again the intangible air, vainly trying to feel for and fend off that softly approaching death. Where, where? To right, or left, or overhead? Slowly he moved his arms about him, like a blind-folded boxer.

"Come on!" he taunted. "I'm here! I'm waiting for you! Are you afraid, Blackbird? Come and get me!"

His mouth was dry. No answer came to him.

As the silence lingered, the suspicion slowly increased in him that the Blackbird was no longer in the room. Hammer was alone. He was as alone as a dead man in a tomb.

What next? He did not have long to wonder.

The reek of gasoline touched his nostrils. A little twisted wisp of burning paper flashed suddenly around a corner of the doorway, and dropped in a parabola to the floor. At once, with a swift hollow roar, the doorway was all ablaze. A sheet of flame shot up to the cobwebbed rafters, licking and lapping at the dry timbers of the cabin.

Behind the overturned stove Hammer crouched, while red shadows leaped toward him and the flame roared in. He could make his choice instantly—stand up and take the racket from that bright eyed, deathly killer skulking in the night beyond, or stay there and be cooked.

ALONG the narrow, flinty trail that came from Bitter Lake there rode the sound of galloping. Dull on drifts of leaves, loud on naked stone, Cedar Rudd's big white mule was coming with steady thunder of hoofs. Cedar Rudd was drumming down, giving the spur at breakneck speed, riding hell-for-leather, Cedar Rudd was drumming down from the Ridge to the Iron Mine cabin!

The loud voice of the woodsman broke into boisterous song, all cheerful and unheeding.

"Mammee! Ma-ha-ha-mam-hee!
Hee-haw! Mam-maw!
Ma-ham-mee!"

Drunk, drunk, crazy drunk with Irish whisky. Shouting out his nearness with a barroom roar, as if the sound of his own galloping was not enough to bring his death on him. And out there in the great whispering night, beyond the red shadows of the burning cabin, sly, watchful, ready, the blackbird waited for him.

Where? Where? If Hammer had known where that skulking fiend lay ambushed, he might have chanced a dash for the rear window before the fire caught him.

"My mammy was a blushing mare;
My old man was a stallion,
And half of me is centipede,
The rest of me is hellion!
For I'm a mule, a long-eared fool,
And I ain't never been to school!
Mammee! Ma-ha-ha-mam-hee!
Hee-haw! Mam-maw!
Ma-ham-mee!"

The racket of that wild galloping changed beat to a quick trot. *Klop-klop-klop-klop!* It came on through the forest. The voice of Cedar Rudd gasped and panted, as he neared the burning cabin. But still he was singing.

"Stop where you are! The Blackbird's gunning for you!" roared Hammer with all his voice.

The drubbing hoofbeats of the heavy mule had betrayed Cedar already. The Blackbird had him spotted. If he were drunk, let him die singing.

Flame seeped and flickered toward Hammer. Half of the cabin was a red roar. There were no shadows now, save in the narrow corner where he hid. He began to feel the dry heat of it upon the flesh of his face. Tentacles of fire flung themselves about the rafters overhead. He crouched like a runner on the mark, tense and shivering, turning his body toward the rear window. With cold gray

look he measured distances, measured chances. In the moment when the Blackbird unloosed the rifle racket on Cedar Rudd, he would dash for it.

Where was the Blackbird, where lying in ambushade? In a moment Hammer would know, by the rattle and the flash. But Cedar Rudd would never know. Wild and drunken on his hard ridden mule, he would take death from the darkness.

The mule bounced on at its steady trot. Suddenly it emerged into the open, a ghostly beast with thudding hoofs.

Then it came! The fireworks! *Br-rup—rup-rup-rup-rup!*

There was a steady, blazing stream in the darkness, not far from the cabin door. Hammer lunged forward, across floorboards already creeping with flame ripples, and plunged head foremost out of the unguarded rear window into tall grass dank with dew.

He dragged himself past the edge of the cabin, away from the fire. The rifle crackle ceased. Across the black glade the ghostly mule was galloping crazily, snorting and screaming, lashing out with its heels. It was riderless now; there was no hand to hold it.

From a clump of bushes near the blazing cabin door, the Blackbird arose and darted forward. He held his rifle to his breast, finger hooked about the trigger. Red shadows played on his quick body. Bending nearly double, he ran toward the spot where the mule had emerged from the forest. His eyes scanned the earth. He was making a curious, low, laughing sound.

Grass stirred beside Hammer. Out of the tangled undergrowth that fringed the glade, directly opposite the trail entrance and so near to Hammer that he might have touched his hand, Cedar Rudd stepped with inaudible lightness. He threw a rifle to his shoulder.

"Did you think I was such easy pickings, Amsel?" he drawled in a hard, sober voice. "Poke 'em up! I want your socks!"

The Blackbird turned his ghastly

white face. He changed his direction and fled like the wind. Cedar grunted an oath. His rifle cracked. The Blackbird stumbled; but still he was running.

VOICES came from the forested slopes, booming across the night. Here, there, on every side of the narrow glade men shouted, answering one another.

"Hi, Cedar! Hi, Cedar! Which way'd he go?"

Electric torches began to flash. A posse of twenty or more police officers, after beating for hours through the forest in a tightening circle, had converged on the Blackbird, had hemmed him in at last.

From the far end of the glade into which he had disappeared, swift as a wolf on the track of the Blackbird, came Cedar Rudd's warning shout:

"Damn you, put out them lights, boys! He'll pot us all!"

There sounded five or six racketing shots, followed instantly by a single report.

"Get him, Cedar?" some one bawled.

Cedar Rudd did not reply.

Cautiously and invisibly the men in the woods came down, for the Blackbird was not caught yet, and there was murder in him. Shadows drifted back and forth across the black glade. Voices mumbled. Where was Cedar, where the Blackbird? It was a deathly game being played in the dark night; and which was the stalker, which the prey, no man could know.

Two shapes came crawling up to Hammer, from right and left. They were police officers. They moved him farther from the fiery cabin, now only a thin shell of flaming bark slabs.

"Get the Blackbird! Don't bother about me," Hammer whispered, as the men tried to make him comfortable on a pile of coats.

They held their rifles half poised. All the time their wrinkled eyes roved about them, seeking the invisible killer.

"We got him penned. He can't break through," one of the officers growled.

"Tell Sergeant Rudd to watch out," Hammer whispered.

"I reckon he'll do that."

Hammer didn't know why he whispered. It seemed that the Blackbird must be listening for him in a tense and awful silence even yet.

"In God's name, where are you, Cedar?" shouted some one in a hoarse, empty bellow.

The echoes of that cry rolled away. The forest swayed, soughed, whispered. The cold wind was freshening. Abruptly from the night silence there came the clear shout of Cedar Rudd:

"Here he is! Quick!"

A rifle's rapid barking silenced his surprised cry. Men were running. Hammer dragged himself over the ground.

"Watch yourselves! Lie low!"

Again the rifle rattled. Other guns replied.

Inch by inch Hammer dragged himself over the ground. Above the Ridge peeked a gibbous lemon moon, flooding the glade with light as pale as water. He crouched back into shadows. The Blackbird was still abroad. No man was to be seen in the clearing.

A spring trickled near Hammer. In the middle of the moonlit glade he saw the Blackbird's little monoplane, with its coffin of a cockpit, its wings folded back upon its fuselage so that it could be stowed in a small space. A new trick of the German designers—Hammer had heard of it. You could tuck a ship like that away in a garage, or in a hole in the ground. Small wonder Cedar Rudd had never found it, with all his searching.

Still no man appeared; but there were the rifle shots down at the end of the clearing; and the great ghostly form of Cedar Rudd's mule galloped across the moonlight.

A man crept with soft tread along the shadows to Hammer, squatting by the brink of the spring. With cupped hand he drank copious draughts. It was Cedar Rudd, breathing hard, a spreading wet stain on his arm.

"Blackbird Amsel is cornered in the old

mine hole, where he's been a-hiding that airplane of his," Cedar panted. "It's going to cost a man's life to get him out. He's made a stand; he won't surrender."

"There's no other exit he could come crawling out of?" asked Hammer with sudden dread.

"It's the end of him," said Cedar in low tones, shaking his head. "I know what them places are. There's hungry, crawling things in the slime and rotten earth, Mr. Hammer, that'd make you sick to look at or feel. And when you're buried in there, with the ooze at your nose, and all in the darkness, them things come creeping—"

Hammer shivered a little, as the cold wind blew.

"It's cold," said Cedar.

"Yes, it's cold," said Hammer.

"God help him, I wish I'd drilled him clean!" cried Cedar in a breaking voice. "He was my brother officer, and I've eaten meat and shared my drink with him. He was a fellowman, say all you can against him, and it ain't right. Why didn't I let him die easy?"

NO MAN dared to go into the old mine shaft. At times they shouted to the Blackbird, and he replied with sullen snarls.

With the setting of the moon, they crept closer to the old mine shaft. Some one lighted a dead pine branch and, when it was burning steadily, flung it around a corner into the entrance. For an instant there was the gleam of swiftly retreating eyes. In the fetid air the torch was smothered out.

When the night was at its blackest, Cedar Rudd crawled up to the dismal door. He had fastened a rope about his waist, and three men held the end of it.

"Come out!" he cried.

He crawled half his length into the old mine shaft. Sweat lathered him, his heart beat slowly. He heard the lapping of foul waters, deep in the old mine shaft. The silence rumbled; the floor beneath him settled down.

"Come out!" he cried. "Come out like a man!"

Deep from the caverns of the earth, wild screaming answered him, and there was the muffled sound of a rifle pumping rapidly. The men upon the rope pulled Cedar back. There came no other sound.

All night they shouted to the Black-

bird, but he did not reply. With the coming of dawn they shouted to him, but still he did not reply. Hollow silence prevailed in the old mine shaft, and there drifted from it a dank stench.

Five days and nights they kept the watch, but no living thing passed out of the old mine shaft, except a fat rattlesnake, crawling sluggishly.

Dragomen

BY ROYCE BRIER

THE EGYPTIAN dragoman is probably the most acquisitive of human beings. Others of his ilk in the Levant possess that quality in lively degree, but the Egyptian, through his contact with white tourists of wealth, appears to have a larger bump of cupidity than any of them.

Dragoman properly means interpreter, but the term now includes all porters, guides, tour contractors and roustabouts centering in Cairo and spreading throughout Egypt, and especially along the lanes of travel of those bent on the conventional three days in the pyramid country. The dragoman is as black as a New Orleans Negro, but to please his patrons has printed on his business cards such names as Mike Murphy and Jock Ferguson. Truth telling is in his eyes a vice, and he is always the cousin of the last dragoman who had you under his wing. His conception of Egyptian history is hazy, and he concocts quaint stories to please you, and is the consummate sycophant always.

But fawning, verbosity and bland falsehoods invariably accompany his avarice. His desire for gain takes a ritual form, and he will squander an entire day trying to maneuver you into his bazaar, where he takes a rather meager commission rather than attempt to meet your wishes and earn a handsome *backsheesh*. I employed a dragoman in Cairo who used every moment of several hours at the pyramids to convince me he was the only friend I had in Egypt. He sided with me against the importuning of countless

Arab camel drivers trying to sell me countless "old" coins or scarabs out of the great sepulchers, "ver' old, ver' dear, my gentlemen."

He took me to the home of some "cousin" at the foot of the pyramids and plied me with tea, and said, "You make me ver' sad" when I proffered payment for his hospitality. He beat off the tradesmen in the Moschi bazaars, but when we arrived at his shop of ancient relics and I declined purchase he was furious. I asked him how much his commission would be on one article I had contemplated, and in a surly tone he told me twenty piasters, something less than a dollar. I laughingly gave him a forty piaster *backsheesh*, but it did not placate him. I lost face with all dragomen.

I have seen but one of them beaten. A Pat Casey, of Port Said, piloted a certain American about that city's dives one night. No payment was made, but the American contracted to take a day trip from the steamer at seven o'clock the next morning. He arose at six and caught a train for Cairo. Cousins innumerable in Cairo tried to collect for Casey. The American was a marked man. When he rejoined his steamer in Alexandria he was still being pursued by Casey's cousins, and Casey, himself, appeared just as the steamer was pulling out, and shouted terrible imprecations, assisted by three-score dragomen. I shudder to think what would have occurred had Casey arrived from Port Said to collect his three or four dollars an hour earlier.



The Camp-Fire



A free-to-all Meeting-Place for Readers, Writers and Adventurers

Rough Words and Rough Men

A TRIP to some distant land each year he passes in his schoolwork! That's the prize offered the son of the newspaper editor who writes the following letter about *Adventure*. Here's hoping the lad makes all A's!

I have just finished reading the issue containing one of Jim Stevens' stories of the northwest lumber camps; and it was certainly gratifying to notice that the conversations of Larrity and the Big Swede and the bits of dialogue and sidelights of lumber camp philosophy had not been strangled by sugar coating.

Being one of those unfortunates whose adventure-faring must be taken at evening astride the easy chair, and by way of *Adventure* magazine, I have long been preparing a protest to *Adventure's* method of deleting the rough words of rough men in rough situations. Imagine Larrity and the Big Swede meeting for the Christmas "blow-in" and discussing the relative merits of each other and each other's immediate ancestors by a series of blanks!

I am not just sure why I read *Adventure*, but I have read it for so long that I've forgotten just when I started. I know it was long before I ever dreamed of becoming a newspaper man. As I look back now and attempt an analysis I am moved to remark that it has been a large part of my education. Since I have so far been unable to travel as extensively as I would like, I realize that I have become somewhat familiar with the lives and customs of people in strange places. I am a close reader of *Camp-Fire* and the other departments of *Adventure*. Because these discussions and arguments are carried on between men who base their statements upon personal experiences, I have come to accept stories and articles alike as authoritative. The story entertains me and the background or setting lets me see how unknown peoples live and have their being.

I have a youngster just now entering high school; and I have promised him a trip of the sort I have always wanted to take, for each year he makes his grades.

Great stacks of *Adventures* fill odd corners around our home; and he is beginning to get interested in

them and to wonder which of the many lands covered he will choose for his first reward trip.

I am not afraid that his morals will be corrupted by knowing what men do under strenuous conditions; and I am very sure that a dash in the course of conversation attracts much more notice than the obvious naturally used.

—H. A. GRANTHAM

Was There A Survivor?

MR. WHEED brings up a mystery of the plains, and asks if any comrade recalls the truth of the matter.

I am eager to freshen my memory of an occurrence in the old Indian Territory, and hope that one of your readers may be able to help me.

As I remember it, it was shortly before the opening of Oklahoma when a posse, headed by Sheriff Crosse, pursued a band of outlaws into No Man's Land. None of the men returned, all of them were supposed to have perished in battle.

I would like to know where Crosse came from, the approximate date of the tragedy, and whether any of the bandits were ever brought to justice.

My sincere thanks to him who can help me.—
A. H. WHEED.

On The Hickory Coals

*Shinny from de charred kaig;
Hawg done crispy brown;
Niggah, slice more hin' laig,
Strangeh, set yo' down!*

THE WAY they do it in Augusta, Georgia—and it surely sounds appetizing, Mr. Kephart.

How to barbecue meat in the good old southern way seems, from my correspondence, to be an attractive mystery to many lovers of outdoor life. I have been a delighted participant in such barbecues; also a disappointed one at times when inexperienced cooks spoiled the 'cue. I have myself

barbecued many a piece of meat over good hickory coals. But I never superintended the roasting and basting and attendant rites when a whole or half beef, sheep or pig was handled. So it is with some thrill of discovery that I am at last enabled to pass along to fellow adventurers a reliable description of how it's done, compiled partly from a letter sent me by Mr. J. J. Conway, of Etowah, Tenn., and partly from an article on barbecues by Mrs. S. R. Dull that appeared last summer in the *Atlanta Journal*.

In the first place, success depends on having plenty of red hot coals, not smoking embers, but solid, glowing coals of fire, on hand through all the hours of this slow-cooking process. Stepping in here on my own account, let me say that soft woods, such as the soft pines, chestnut, basswood, poplar, spruce, cedar, willow, cottonwood and the like, are no good at all. They burn merely to ashes. Hardwoods only can make good coals, and not all of them. Best of all is hickory. Live oak is good, and so are white, blackjack, overcup, post, basket and chestnut oaks. Sugar maple and dogwood make fine fuel for the purpose, but it is a sin to use such useful and beautiful trees. Birch of any species burns up too quickly, but it is fine to start the more stubborn, slow burning woods.

Dig an extra pit for making coals and keeping them replenished, or have several fires going in the neighborhood of the barbecue pit. To keep coals from burning up too soon after they get red, cover them with ashes; they will then keep in good condition for hours.

Green hardwood makes just as good coals as seasoned wood, though it works best in the fall and winter when the sap is down.

Now, Mrs. Dull says, the meat should be young and tender. A pig of about fifty pounds is best; lambs or kids of medium size. Sometimes a half steer is barbecued in one piece, but so large a carcass takes many, many hours to cook well done, and a lot of muscle to handle.

Suppose you have a small pig. Remove head near shoulders, and feet just above the first joint. Cut or saw lengthwise through center of backbone so the pig will open perfectly flat. Remove the thin flanks on each side in a circular cut. Now run sharpened iron rods longitudinally through hams and shoulders, the rods being long enough to project a good way so as to rest on banks of pit and to furnish handholds. If you have no iron rods, green oak sticks may do. Insert rods near the skin and under the ribs, in order that the neck, shoulders and hams may go down lower into the pit and get more heat. The rods under the ribs prevent their falling out when tender.

Laterally insert three or four small rods (iron or oak, like skewers), stuck through at proper intervals at sides and extending through the carcass. Fasten the rods in place with hay wire. They keep the meat from dropping off when done.

MEANTIME the pit has been dug, sixteen to eighteen inches deep, four feet wide, and as long as needed. Put red hot coals into the pit. The

heat should be moderate at first. When the meat is warm, begin basting with a strong solution of salt in warm water and with a little cayenne pepper added. The meat itself has not been salted at all. Keep the basting liquor warm. One quart of strong salt water will do for fifty pounds of meat. Do the basting with a swab of cheesecloth or other clean rag on the end of a long stick. Keep up the basting at intervals, whenever the meat shows dry, until the barbecue is nearly done.

Keep the meat side next to the fire, skin side up, most of the time; but as often as it becomes dry turn it over, baste the meat side and let the skin get hot. Cook slowly, but as the process continues more heat may be applied. Keep the coals bunched under the shoulders and hams, as they are thickest and require more cooking than the thin parts. With proper basting the meat will not scorch or get dry and tasteless; but it must be watched carefully.

Young small carcasses will require seven hours or more. Mr. Conway says: "If you want to have a barbecue dinner at 1 p. m., start your fires about 12 midnight of the day before."

When the meat is nearly done, turn the skin side down, quit the brine basting, and begin basting with the barbecue sauce. Experts differ, as tastes do, about sauces. Here is a simple one: 1 gallon cider vinegar, 1 pound butter, $\frac{1}{2}$ doz. (or less) red pepper pods, $\frac{1}{2}$ doz. lemons, 1 bottle Lea & Perrin Worcestershire sauce. Boil all together, then baste in same way as with the salt water. Keep the sauce warm, and continue basting with it till the meat is done. The proportions are enough for two medium carcasses.

A more elaborate sauce; $2\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. butter, 2 quarts apple vinegar, 1 pint water, 1 tablespoon dry mustard (Conway prefers French salad mustard), $\frac{1}{2}$ cup minced onion, 1 bottle Worcestershire sauce, 1 pint tomato catsup, 1 medium-size bottle chile sauce, juice of two lemons, rind of half lemon, 3 cloves, garlic chopped fine and tied in bag, 2 teaspoons sugar. Mix all together, cook, and keep warm. Begin using when meat is about three-fourths done.

Mr. Conway objects to the chile, saying it detracts from the taste of the 'cue.

When the meat is done and very tender, remove some of the coals from the pit and turn the skin side down to brown and crisp. Watch closely here, so the skin does not turn gummy, but is crisp.

When ready to serve, cut up into pieces suitable to handle and baste them freely with the sauce; but put the skin in one pan, the meat in another, and do not baste the skin at all or it will be gummy. To be good, the skin must be crisp and brittle.

Cold slaw, pickles, onions, tomatoes, rye bread or white bread, coffee: these are the orthodox accompaniments of a barbecue. There used to be others, to wit, certain liquids now under ban of the Great *Verboten*.

Yes, there may be some leftovers. Well, here is Mr. Conway's barbecue hash: "Take straight beef, or beef and pig, or beef and sheep—enough to make what hash you want—shred it or pull it apart,

making it stringy; then use an iron pot with enough water to boil the meat, putting in plenty of cayenne pepper to make the stuff 'hot,' and cook for an hour or more."

And he concludes: "If you are ever around Augusta, Georgia, especially in the summer, when they have 'cues, enquire where one is being cooked; go out to see how it is done, and talk with the cooks. Mr. Charles Bohler, state and county tax collector, is an authority on this. Look him up."

People, I'm hungry. First chance I get, it's me for Augusta, Georgia.

—HORACE KEPHART,
Chairman, Board of Alderman,
Bryson City, N. C.

Along The Trail I

HE HAD gone somewhat to fat, and had achieved a tramplike appearance, which was enhanced by what seemed to be a permanent four day stubble of black beard. Yet he was big of frame, and bulging muscles played under his greasy flannel shirt. I bought a couple of golden pompano from him at his disreputable looking fish and vegetable store on Pass Christian's waterfront. And then, because I had certain illicit hopes for my stay—hopes thus far unrealized—I grumbled something about the strangely arid condition of this country, a place I had expected to find flowing with the pure McCoy from British Honduras and Mexico.

"Drier than the Ralston Desert," were the words which caught his attention. He looked up, sudden hunger glinting through the apathy.

"The desert? The old Ralston Desert, yuh said?" he queried swiftly. And then not giving a chance for reply, he went on, "Hell, the desert ain't dry! It's—but step back this away stranger. Yuh was lookin' for a snort of good red likker, yuh said? Well, here's some come in from Cat Island a coupla days ago."

He reached down under some frowsy blankets on a cot, and produced a half filled bottle and a dubious looking tumbler.

"Fill 'er up!" he bade. "An' 'en—Tolman, yuh said was the name?—tell me, when was you last on the Ralston? Are the ol' Reveille's still purple an' gold at

sundown? Was you prospectin' too? My God, I was at Tonopah, an' Rhyolite, an' Bullfrog, an'—"

But that night the hours fled. A second bottle came to light, and its level drained. Enlivened, my new friend told of the sad mischance which had stranded him here; and declared that just as soon as he could scrape together a grubstake and railway fare, he was going back.

"They's more gold an' silver left than they ever took outa the Rand!" he declared with a thump of one big fist. "An' I'm the boy to find it!"

It may have been that black label Johnny Walker; but partly, I suppose, it was fellow feeling. At any rate, next day, when a splitting headache had subsided and my eyes had come uncrossed sufficiently so I could read the figures on a check stub, it came to light that I—I had grubstaked the hellious old sonofagun! And he had left town, as I speedily ascertained. With one wry gesture I kissed four hundred dollars goodby.

THAT was nineteen months ago. The other day the expressman delivered a small, heavy package—a cigar box done up in newspapers and string. It looked a good deal like an infernal machine; but after soaking it in water for a few hours, I took a chance and opened it.

Out came a lot of soaked and sticky cotton batting—and about four dozen bits of what looked like smoky chunks of fused glass. I looked at them, puzzled. One was about the size of a pullet egg. What was the joke, anyway?

Down in the box, however, I came on a single sheet of wet paper, pencil scrawled. It read:

Dear Toi-Yabe,

I used up yer stake but got another. Just struck dimonds. Heres a few fer suve-neers. Come on out right quick. Your a forth share in this.

BULLFROG BILL.

The jewelers tell me that my "chunks of glass" really are diamonds—not the pre-

cious sort, because their color is smoky, but quite valuable for use as drill points, phonograph needles, and the like.

So I'm on my way. Mebbe that four hundred bucks' worth of Johnny Walker still holds a kick. Who knows?

—TOI-YABE TOLMAN

Morning's Morning—Mules and Men

IN LUMBER camp or mining camp, food is necessary fuel. And it has to be right in quality as well as quantity, or the rumpus is impressive.

One of the strongest small men in the world, I believe—or most efficient with his strength, perhaps—is a well known guide in the forested waterways of Itasca County, Minnesota. When he has a pair of city men in charge, it is mere routine for Mike to paddle and portage all day, pack his own seventy pounds of camp gear, carry the sixteen foot canoe across the portages, and come in at night also toting the rifles, fishing rods, venison and fish of his party.

I believe there's much to be said for Mr. Roe's contention in the following letter—although structurally speaking I can't class myself with the little guys.

Comrade Stevens's remarks about the grub furnished to the downtrodden proletariat by the heartless corporations, touches a responsive chord. Any one who has pried his plate loose from the oilcloth with a knife in the average mining camp ought to agree with him. I've seen a man use up a pint of raspberry jam and half a pound of ninety cent butter on six half-inch hot cakes as a starter, and then kick at paying a dollar a day for board. This was when we were on the war-time sugar ration; when we broke the "Deacon" of using five spoonfuls to the cup of coffee. This was done by substituting pulverized alum. The Deacon swallowed his dose without wiggling an eyelash, but he was off sugar from then on.

Speaking of grub and such, here's a true tale. Our super quit, and the New York owners sent out a new-hatched E. M., with the pin-feathers still showing, to take his place. In making out his first order for supplies he consulted the mine foreman, who suggested, among other things, barley. The super went to the cook for his list and after getting it asked,

"Just how much barley do you use in a month, Kay?"

"Barley?" says Kay Hashimoto. "Men don't eat barley. Oatmeal."

"Guess Jim was mistaken," and the super marked the barley off the list.

While the truck was being unloaded Jim showed up.

"Where's the barley?" he wanted to know.

"Oh," says the super, "I didn't order it. Kay says the men don't eat it."

"I know they don't," says Jim. "But if you don't get half a ton o' barley here tonight them mules in the corral'll be howlin' their heads off."

"Ridiculous," says this efficient young E. M. "No wonder this mine has been running in the hole when they feed the animals such expensive stuff. Why, man, barley costs fifty cents a pound. Give 'em oats and corn."

It was really quite an argument. Not until another E. M., but older and wiser, had convinced him did the super order the barley for the mules. Seems he had used it for breakfast food or something and hadn't the correct ideas.

Jim was a medium sized man, 5'6" and 145 lbs., but one night he carried a 180 pound man with a broken leg down a ninety foot chute and then up a 300 foot perpendicular raise. It's no fun to carry a weight like that *down* a ladder, but up! And at an altitude of six thousand feet. My hat's always off to Jim.

In my very limited experience I have found that the smaller men seem to be able to stand more grief and hard back-breaking labor than their bigger brothers. I have known a 135 lb. Yankee man to handle one hundred and thirty-eight tons of pig iron in ten hours. This meant lifting pigs weighing around eighty pounds each, carrying them thirty or forty feet and piling them in a box car. I have been told that the record was 212½ tons loaded by a Pittsburg man named Sawyer. That makes 425,000 lbs. That way, it seems even more. I like to think that the small man is the goods, because I'm a runt myself.

Please, Mister Editor, give us a bigger Camp-Fire. I know it's bromidic to say I always read it first, but it's the petrified truth. No other magazine has anything that compares to it, and if you should put it to a vote you would find that 96.33% of us feel the same way. And thanks from me for the picture covers once more. The others may be more dignified and "artistic", whatever that is, but they don't seem to have the authority.

—CHARLES E. ROE

A Knife Expert

MR. RUSE appended the name and history of the man to whom he refers, but asked that this part of the information be kept confidential.

I read with considerable interest Ethan Snow's letter *re* knife throwing, and in return forward this personal experience.

For some years there was in the employ of the Union Station Baggage Department at Toronto a man who could take a knife and at ten feet pin a

paper the size of a quarter dollar to the door, five out of six consecutive shots. The knife would usually penetrate the door panel, which was one-quarter of an inch thick. This door is still in existence and the holes can yet be seen.

I have in my possession a two bladed pocket knife, weighing less than two ounces, which he used on more than one occasion.

His method of holding the knife was to lay the blade along the fingers with the point just back of the tip of the middle finger and held in place with his bent thumb, the fingers curled around the blade in a semi-circle.

He had two methods of throwing, one a half arm throw with a peculiar twisting flip of the wrist at the end, and the other a full arm throw, which as stated above would make the knife blade penetrate the panel.

—ARTHUR G. RUSE.

Slum-Gum

A DELICIOUS and filling meal for a quartette of hungry men—price four bits each, or less. *If you like garlic, listen to Comrade Burke.*

I'd scarcely call this the sort of chow you'd want at a Sunday dinner when the old folks came to visit, but it sure made a ten-strike with me—and still does. I hash up a Dutch oven full of it regularly once a month, while my German cook glares at me over her private pigs' knuckles and kraut. She can't understand why anyone—but then, there are other things from the South, like "gopher" (land tortoise) gumbo, and crabs Creole, which drive her very *kalteraufschnitt*, too.

I met slum-gum head on for the first time on a five day trammel netting trip made with a trio of Gulf Coast Creoles, off Chanley Island. With un-buttered bread, much, much chicoried coffee, and a jug of Barbados rum, slum-gum was the staple ration. It was made as follows:

Into a pot of salted, boiling water a good handful of spaghetti was broken. While this cooked half a dozen skinned kernels of garlic were sliced, a quarter pound of smoked ham diced, and a fish or turtle cut up for cooking.

These went into a hot Dutch oven shortly following the diced ham. And then when this mixture sputtered away merrily, two cans of tomato paste were added, and a couple ounces of grated Parmesan cheese. When the spaghetti was about the right texture (half cooked), it was drained and stirred into the Dutch oven. Then the whole mixture cooked half an hour, stirred once or twice in that period.

Variety was attained by altering the kind of fish. I had mullet, red snapper, golden pompano, terrapin, sheepshead—but mostly mullet, as it brought the fishermen only four cents a pound.

The cost of such a meal, including coffee, bread and a tot of rum, was about one and a half or two bucks—varying with the kind of fish used, and charging market price for it.

And believe me it is some dish—even if you lose the friendship of all your apartment house neighbors!

—ARTHUR C. BURKE.

If Tecumseh Had Used Curare—

HARSHLY beset as they were by hostile redmen, the American pioneer settlers yet were saved one unspeakable horror. Poisoned darts, sent flying silently from ambush, might have gone far in nullifying the superiority of the flintlock musket.

As a final word in the discussion of the blowgun, Mr. Fink writes:

It would appear that when a few months ago I wrote Mr. Woodward of the "A. A." section regarding a Cherokee Indian blowgun I started another Camp-Fire discussion. Since that time a little more dope on this weapon has come to my knowledge, and I am glad to pass it on for the benefit of Mr. Lucien Beckner and any others who might be interested. Be it understood, however, what I have learned refers to the Eastern American Indian only, and may not hold true with natives of other regions.

Mr. Beckner argues that the blowgun is a deep forest weapon. No doubt this is true, but mainly for the reason that the range of the blowgun is limited—around 150 feet is the best I can do, though natives exceed this figure—making it essential for the hunter to have enough cover to get close to the quarry unobserved, and not that the blowgun is more easily handled in the brush than the longbow. Quite the contrary. The shortest blowgun I have seen was over seven feet long—my own is eleven—and any man who has taken a fishing pole through a thicket can realize just how easy it would be to handle a cane that length in dense undergrowth. I'll pick the longbow every time for brush work.

Second, as far as I have been able to discover, there is no evidence of the Eastern Indian using poison on his arrows or darts. Had he done so in hunting he certainly would not have overlooked its advantage in war, particularly against the white invaders, to counterbalance the advantage of their firearms. Had he done so the early chronicles would have been full of it as another example of "savage fiendishness." None I have ever perused has ever mentioned such a thing. This to my mind is all evidence to the contrary.

The darts in my collection are some two feet in length, of hickory or other hardwood about the size of a soda straw, feathered with thistledown. They carry no point other than the sharpened wood, but are effective against small game. I killed a dove with one a short time ago. I cannot believe they were used with flint or other points, for, considering the means of propulsion, the added weight of the point would cut down the range materially, and really would not add to the penetration.

Lacking the use of poison, the blowgun is too

feeble a weapon for purposes of war, or hunting other than small game and birds. Bearing out this is a reference found in the memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake, one of the earliest white visitors to the Cherokee Indians, spending some time with them in 1756. Speaking of the game then swarming over the country, he says, "—an infinity of other birds, pursued by the children, who, at eight and ten years old, are very expert at killing with a *sarbacan*, or hollow cane, through which they blow a small dart, whose weakness obliges them to shoot at the eye of the larger sort of prey, which they seldom miss."

This accuracy is not yet a lost art, for I am told of an old Cherokee now living in the Great Smokies who can consistently hit a half dollar at fifty feet.

—PAUL M. FINK.

J. D. Mynatt

HERE'S an old-timer of the West who deserves greater recognition.

Being a constant reader of your magazine and especially interested in the personalities of the men who fought the early battles of the West I thought possibly other readers would be interested in learning of the recent death of J. D. Mynatt on July 18th at Palestine, Texas. I have no doubt that many

will remember him as one of the few surviving old time peace officers who went through the rough times of the last two decades of the 19th Century in the Southwest.

Mynatt was with me at times over a period of two years on my plantation in Anderson County, Texas, and in intimate conversations detailed many of his man chases in most interesting recountal. He had a splendid memory and apparently could tell an episode as though it had just occurred, remembering each sequence of events without hesitation.

Born about 1856 on his father's plantation in the above county he took his part in the dark days of reconstruction that followed the Civil War. When he was about 11 years old it became his duty to guard his father's home and his sister from the frenzy of excess and license in which the negroes of the South indulged following the war and during the Carpet-bagger days. Even at that age he rode armed, with his brothers to prevent the negroes from holding a forbidden meeting in the County Court House at Palestine.

When he was 16 he was appointed a Deputy-Sheriff and except for a few years of farming around the age of 20 he followed the hazardous vocation of a peace officer of the Southwest from then up to about the time of his decease. Mynatt took part in the pursuit and capture of many of the noted

ACTION, PLEASE.

If the sunshine makes you just a little tipsy,
If the wind sings wander-ballads in your ear,
Then you'll understand the feeling of a gypsy
That he'd rather be 'most anywhere but here.

If you weary of the track you're trudging over,
Of the round that's everlastingly the same,
Then you'll understand the spirit of the rover
And the restlessness that animates his frame.

If you're longing for the Other Side of Nowhere
And you yearn to follow trails you've never trekked,
You will understand the tramps who want to go where
There is something new and different to expect.

If the sight of rolling tides and creaming combers
Wakes a restless sort of fever in your blood,
You will understand the sea-enchanted roamers
As they sail on arks that navigate the flood.

If you hanker for a life that is a free one,
If the very breezes tempt you as they blow,
You will understand the gypsies—but to *be* one
You must break the ties that fetter you and *go!*

—BERTON BRALEY.

desperados during the early Indian Territory days and was a brother officer with Capt. Bill McDonald and Ben Tillinghama.

I remember reading *Adventure* to my wife and him one evening a couple of years ago. It was an issue of June, I believe, 1925 and in the back I noted an account of a fight between two cattle thieves and the body of Texans who were recruited and brought to Wyoming around 1892 by the cattlemen of that State to fight the rustlers who had created a serious situation there by the extent and boldness of their cattle stealing. This account quoted from a diary kept by one of these two rustlers as they were besieged in a cabin by the Texans and as they knew death was certain if they remained they decided to escape if possible.

THE diarist stated that one man in particular of the Texans was a very accurate shot and had come close to getting him yet about the only avenue of possible escape was in the direction of the spot from which he was shooting. The diary ended with the statement he was about to make an attempt to get away. From there the account went on to say he was killed in the attempt. When I finished reading Mynatt said "I was the man who killed him," and then related how he anticipated this man would try to escape and he thought he would come his way. The rustler suddenly appeared and each saw the other about the same time and started shooting with their rifles. Mynatt said he knew he hit the man with his first shot as he saw his coat jerk towards the back as the bullet passed through him and that he shot twice more with the same effect before the man fell dead close to his feet.

Mynatt was often asked to sell the story of his life for it was well recognized that his terms as a peace officer in that rough period had seen many a carefully planned and executed man chase and encounters with numbers of the hard living desperadoes of the time. He would not talk freely of these incidents and so I was not only extremely interested in listening to his recountals but also felt honored by his telling them to me and have often wished I had set down in his complete detail and proper sequence the exciting affairs with which his life had been filled.

He was a man of fine intellect; good blood; pleasing personality and an analyst. He could have gone far in any chosen profession and I believe he did a man's share in bringing the fear of law into a Territory that did not want it.—WALTER GODART.

TROPHIES

THE ONLY single thing I expected to find and failed to find, in coming to *Adventure*, was a long, cool gallery, the walls of which were covered with trophies, weapons and curios from the ends of the earth. I subconsciously imagined a grinning totem from British Columbia, the

head of a Congo dwarf elephant, a Malay kris, a walrus tusk knife, possibly even a shrunken human head from some Mundurucu village on the Amazon.

Perhaps good reasons exist why *Adventure's* readers and writers should not have a trophy room, a friendly place to visit when in New York, perhaps for fans to meet the writers they most admire. But I can't think of any such reasons, just now. Of course the scientific museum aspect would be lacking. Each piece sent in would necessarily have its story, there for all visitors to read—the tale of a man in some far place, and of the strange adventure which sought him out.

Personally, I'd get a genuine thrill out of the contributions; they would be warm with personality, and filled with exotic glamor.

The story of each trophy hung would go into Camp-Fire, of course, so comrades too far away for a personal visit, could hear and know. And it might be that in time the collection would outgrow limited quarters, and become nationally known and unique—worthy of real attention from the public at large.

One of my friends here suggests that few men will wish to part with the souvenir of a real adventure. Well, all right. Time is long—and it is my fervent hope and real expectation that the love of adventure will be just as long, in human hearts. There might well be a souvenir, valued for its associations by *Adventure* readers and the adventurer himself, which could be hung in our trophy room only when the owner's story was told, and he had shouldered his pack on the last long trail into the sunset.

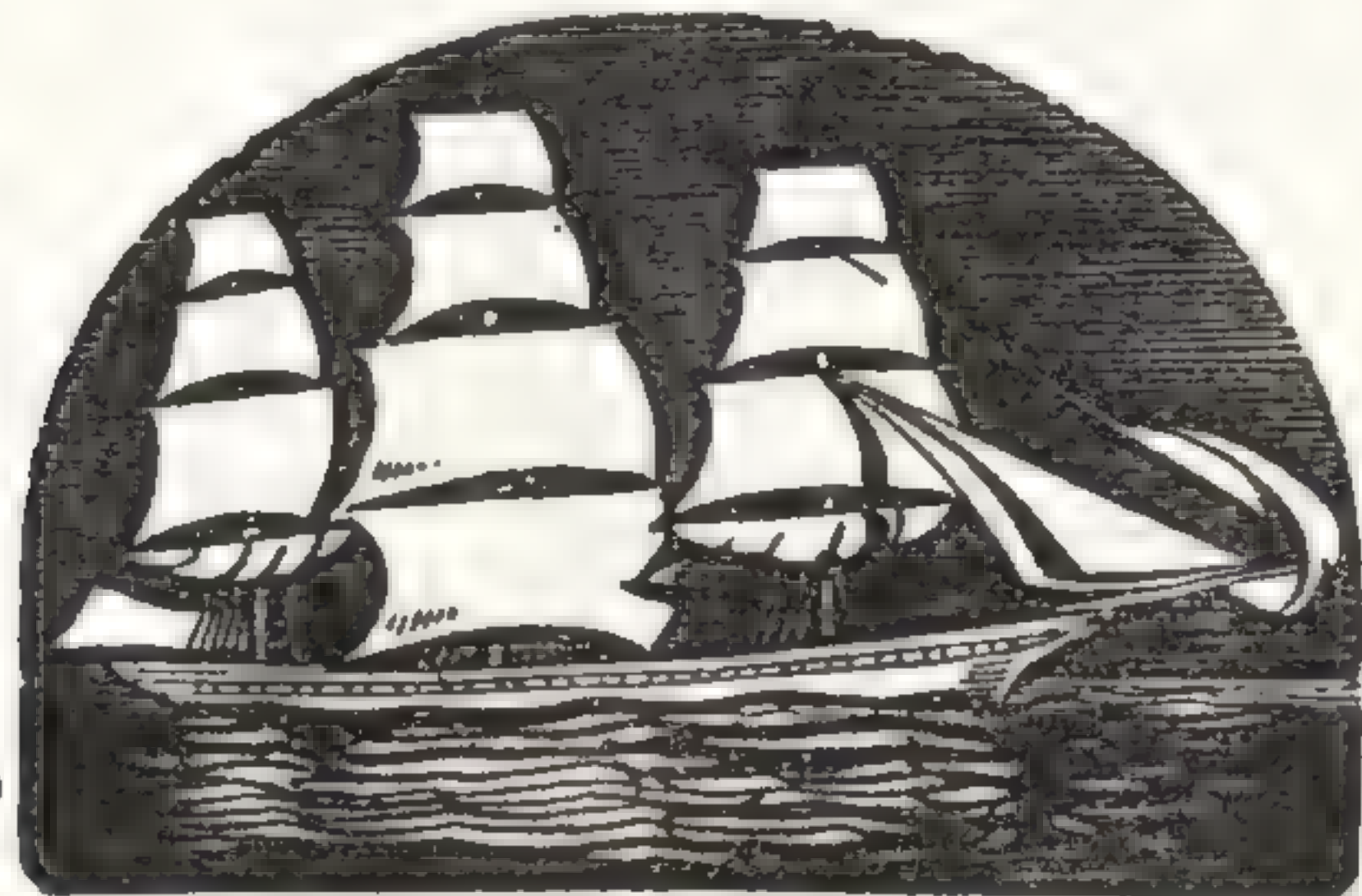
But would that not enhance its actual value?

Seems to me that a collection of stories—for that is what they would be—slowly gathered over a long period of years, would make a chronicle of the wide spaces of the world, full worth a pilgrimage to read.

What say, brothers of the firelight? It's entirely up to you.

—ANTHONY M. RUD.

ASK *Adventure*



For *free information* and *services* you can't get elsewhere

Side-Arms

GUNS at the hip, under the arm-pit, at the wrist—and in the hat—perhaps?

Request:—"What type of side-arm is best for all around service in the tropic and sub-tropical countries? Wouldn't an automatic be better for a fellow that had not had much experience with fire-arms; he could empty it more quickly than the six-shooter? But perhaps that is not a recommendation for it. I have also heard that they are inclined to jam. Is this likely to happen if kept clean and well oiled?"

Where should the gun be worn so it could be brought into play the quickest? I remember reading something you wrote about a 'sleeve-draw' but don't remember any of the details. Is this the quickest form of a draw? Will you please give me the details of this and another trick form of draw or two, and how executed? Seems like I have heard or read of a fellow having a gun under his hat and when he tipped it back the gun fell into his hand. Sounds like a fish story to me though.

If memory serves, nothing larger than a .38 can be carried into South or Central America. Is this correct?

I understand that guns can be bought at cost if one belongs to a rifle or pistol club. Does this hold good also for ammunition?"—HAROLD HOLLINGSWORTH, Fort Worth, Tex.

Reply, by Mr. Donegan Wiggins:—I'd select either one of the three following *revolvers* for use as a side-arm in South or Central America: Colt or Smith & Wesson Military Models, or the old Single Action Army Colt, for the .38 Special ammunition, blued finish and walnut grips, and a gold bead front sight. Barrel length to suit yourself, but I'll say my pet is the five inch one, being neither too short to shoot well, nor too long to carry conveniently.

Of course, if a man demanded the largest possible caliber, he could select a Single Action or New Service Colt, and for the .38 Winchester cartridge, but I'd really prefer the .38 Special. I don't care for revolvers shooting the rifle cartridges, as a rule, although I'll readily admit they come in handily when one wishes to carry a rifle for the same load, like the .32 or .38 Winchester or Remington rifles, and a Colt revolver for the same cartridge. Incidentally, rifle ammunition is more easily procured in out-of-the-way places than revolver cartridges.

AS FOR holsters, I always recommend a good shoulder holster, worn under the coat at the left armpit, as it's fast enough, and well concealed. Personally, I don't like to carry a gun where every one can see it, as it looks rather far-fetched, now that Western (?) magazines are so widely circulated. I may add that I use the Hardy holsters, made up to my order by Captain Hardy, but the pouch type of shoulder holster is also excellent, and I really prefer it to some spring ones sold by other firms.

I don't care for the automatic pistols; if kept clean and well oiled they are reliable in most cases, if loaded with the "oil-proof" ammunition, but why take a chance of one tying up on you, when the revolver keeps on operating anyhow?

Some men carried Derringers in a holster strapped to their wrists, and drew with the other hand; some slung them by an elastic cord up the sleeve, and jerked the hand forward, when the gun slid down far enough to be caught and fired, if the user was expert enough. I never heard of anything worth while in the line of carrying a revolver in the hat, although it might have been done. But I judge it to be some hack writer's pipe-dream. I believe most of the so-called gunfighters were ultimately gathered in by officers with Winchesters or sawed-off shotguns, it may be added here.

I know of no club selling revolvers and pistols to its members at cost, but the members of the United States Revolver Association, Col. Roy D.

Jones, Secretary, Springfield, Mass., are given the courtesy of reduced prices by Smith & Wesson, and I believe of Colts, also. And the members of the National Rifle Association can by proper application buy used .45 Model 1917 revolvers and ammunition from the Government, at very low prices as compared to retail ones.

Enigma

BOXER or wrestler—swordsmen or saberman?

Request:—"All things being equal who would have the advantage in a fight between two men, one armed with a saber and the other with a dueling sword or rapier?"

I would also like to know whether women ever attain the same proficiency in fencing as men?"—MISS CHARLOTTE METZLER, New York.

Reply, by Lieutenant John V. Grombach:—Your first question is a far older one than the oft repeated one asking who would win between a champion wrestler and a champion boxer. Both questions, however, resemble each other in that they can be answered correctly in one way or the other.

It is really impossible to foretell the result of an imaginary duel between imaginary people and with imaginary conditions.

However, the advantage would be with the saberman. A saber in addition to having a point like the dueling sword has one cutting edge along its full length and also six inches of blade on the end of its reverse edge. In other words, any positive "lunge" or attack on the part of the man with the point weapon could be met by a "parry," then by a mere straightening of the arm the other edge of the saber could cut to the head, neck or flank of the *épée* or rapier wielder.

With regard to your second question: Women may attain great proficiency in fencing but as in tennis, riding, or golf the male champion can generally overcome the female of the species.

Salmon Trolling

"AY DON' qvit so long dere is salmon in der sea."

Request:—"Would you kindly send me any information as to salmon fishing in Alaska? I am a fisherman, having seined for mackerel and blue fish; I have also trolled for fluke and flounders.

People who have been in Alaska have told me that salmon fishers make from \$2500 to \$5000 in the season. Is this a fact? Do the fisheries supply the boat and gear or is necessary to have your own?"—G. K., Staten Island, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. Victor Shaw:—In reply to your inquiry in re power trolling in Alaskan waters for

king salmon, I am enclosing leaflet on the subject, which takes the matter in detail. There is no other matter published on this industry, which is comparatively new; and which is merely a natural development (I refer to the gear and method of fishing) on the spot by the men who met the difficulties and found means of surmounting them.

Your statement that you have heard trollers here make from \$2500 to \$5000 in a season is correct, and suspect it came from one of the several letters I had printed in *Adventure* on the subject. My statement there was: "trollers here are making as high as \$6500 in a season of from six to seven months. 'High-boat' in 1924 totaled \$4000; in 1925 the amount made by the most successful boat was \$6500."

The present year, of 1927, has been the biggest run of salmon in the history of the Territory. Every one who could get hold of any sort of a craft with which to troll, did so and made a big success. Hand-trollers were and are making around \$40 a day; one man who had never trolled before bought an old yacht, fitted it and took \$1500 net profit in three weeks, sold his boat and went to Seattle. Another averaged \$208 a day for weeks, and another made over \$400 in one day.

What "high-boat" will total at the end of the season in November is highly problematical, but it is certain to beat all previous records.

Two days ago I was told that Ole Knutsen (a green troller, who is fishing now for the second year only) is now in his sixth thousand dollars and the salmon are still running well, with the fall run in October still to come. Asked if he would quit soon, having so much money already, Knutsen replied with emphasis: "Ay don' qvit so long dere is a salmon in der sea." In an ordinary year the average for skilled men is \$2000.

Ship's Gear

THE HALLIARDS that the Old Man let go and that took the mate aloft for a surprise ride.

Request:—"The writer in his younger days, ere he became 'another lean unwashed artificer,' put in some time windjamming. He is now, after thirty odd years in steamboats and steamers, retired and free to do whatever he darn pleases, providing he is able—

I have a little place in the country, and here I nurse a flower garden, paint pictures, draw and sketch, do a little 'skulping' in cement, feed an occasional hobo and, when not otherwise engaged, dodge wild-eyed motorists, the hardest to dodge are the New Jersey ones.

Among the things I find I can do is to make a fairly good ship's model; I started to make a model of a barque I used to sail in, the *Matanzas*, Capt. Rice, master, and later Capt. Erickson, Master—Munson, owner. In the making I made the error of too much beam for length and, not wanting to

waste the work I had done on it, I turned her into a brig. When finished she looked as pretty as a picture, and I often look at her just for the pleasure of it; and the more I look the more I wonder if I have her right.

THE trouble is I'm in doubt as to where to lead the various halliards, buntlines, leachlines, etc. Bound for Havana one time, the appearance of an approaching squall had the Old Man guessing for awhile, then he seemed to get kinda scared and yelled out to take in royals and t'gansels, fore an' main top'sels, down jib and stay'sels. 'Get thet gaff top'sel of her Mister!' and the orderly disorder of a vessel being shortened down was set in motion—but the motion wasn't speedy enough for Capt. Rice, and in his hurry and urge to get sail off her he ran forward to let go certain halliards on the port side, or at the port pinrail to which the halliards from the fore upper topsail led—or perhaps it was the fore t'gan'sel—darned if I can remember. What I do remember is seeing the skipper run for'ard and let go the halliard just as the mate had lifted the coil off the belaying pin and thrown it down on deck, and the mate stepped back to give the skipper room, and he stepped right in the coil—and shot half way up the foremast as the yard came down.

All this happened on the port side and that's all I am sure of—which halliard it was that took the mate aloft I can't remember, and that's the why of all this rigamarole.

Will you please set me right in regard to this matter of where the various halliards, buntlines, leachlines, etc., lead? And any other information you give me on this subject will be greatly appreciated."—MCALPIN BROWN, Highland, N. Y.

Reply, by Captain Dingle:—Except in the old whalers, where running rigging had to make room for whaling gear, most ships had their gear lead down on alternate sides. Foretopsail halliards to port, main to starboard, mizzen to port. Fore-t'gallant halliards to starboard, main to port, mizzen to starboard. And so on. It was doubtless the foretopsail-halliards that the Old Man let go and took the mate aloft.

Leachlines were in the pinrails, at the fore end, on both sides. Topsail and topgallant sheets came down to the bitts at the fiferail, each side, at each mast. Topsail reef-tackles, each side, at the pinrails, abaft the leachlines. Then in order along the pinrails at each side following the reef-tackles aft, came the topsail buntlines, the topgallant clewlines, the topgallant buntlines. Jib and staysail halliards came down to the pinrails abaft all. Lower lifts and lower clewgarnets, topsail clewlines, lower reef-tackles, at the fiferail. Staysail downhauls also at fiferail. Fore and main sheets abaft the topsail halliards. Braces, lower and topsail, usually led down to the bulwarks and through a lead from outside to within; all above topsail yards were braced to the mast abaft (or in the case of mizzen yards, before).

Tin and Platinum

IT IS not only gold that incites mass rushes to far places. Choose your own samples and consult a *reliable* assayer.

Request:—"From 8 ounces of rock, smelted in an electric furnace, we obtained 1 ounce of 97% tin. From another specimen we obtained a white metal composed of platinum, tin, copper and antimony.

1. What equipment would be required to extract this tin in commercial quantities?

2. What would be the minimum capital required?

3. Would the recovery of the platinum present serious difficulties?

4. Would you give me a bibliography on the subject of tin mining?"—HELMER BJORGE, Grant's Pass, Oregon.

Reply, by Mr. Victor Shaw:—I have been much interested in the story regarding the tin alleged to have been discovered near Grant's Pass, Oregon; mainly because I've seen the report of Mr. Frank W. Griffin, who bonded that property from George Young and his associates and for whom the demonstration smelting tests were made at their property near Saxe and Mays Creeks.

Mr. Griffin is said to have lost interest in the proposition because while analysis of the rock yielded some tin, antimony, lead and copper, all tests made by him in another furnace similar to that used by Young et al. yielded nothing whatever, and all the tests and analyses made by him and chemists in his employ were negative.

Griffin went no further because he was convinced there was nothing in the Young property of a commercial nature, yet in some way news that he had bonded the Young property for \$100,000 got out to the press. As a result, prospectors flocked in there and staked a lot of country nearby, because they accepted the newspaper yarns and gossip in nearby towns as facts. Whether those prospectors now know that no tin was found, I am not informed, but it seems too bad if they are still misled.

YOU'LL remember that not so long ago a story of the discovery of platinum came from Grant's Pass; but the U. S. Bureau of Mines sent men in who found it utterly unfounded and who successfully exploded that will-o'-the-wisp and quieted the excitement. I understand that Government agents are now also on the trail of this tin and "white metal" excitement.

If you happen to be one of those who acquired mining claims due to the above, I'm afraid you're due for disappointment—at least as to the tin, or as you state some platinum as well. Anyway, since that is merely my personal idea, and which may be wrong, you should mail samples of your rock to a qualified and *reliable* assayer for analysis. I'll give the address of one you can depend upon. Select the samples *yourself*—don't permit any one to touch them. Better yet, don't let any one know you

take them. You can abide by the results obtained, whatever they may be.

Tin, you know, comes from two sources only, so far as is now known. Much is obtained as alluvial deposits in gold placers, called stream-tin. Then there are but two important sources of vein tin: cassiterite, which is the principal ore of tin, and which occurs in granites, or granitic rocks only. The other is stannite, the pyrites of tin, which is steel-gray in color (sometimes brass yellow) and which contains tin, copper, iron, and sulphur. The tests for this are fairly simple. The ore is easily marked on by a knife-point. It is twice as heavy as quartz. When heated strongly in a fusing spoon, it is covered with a snow-white oxide.

Platinum is exceedingly refractory and difficult to refine. Mines carrying platinum ship their ores to a special smelter in New Jersey. The platinum assay is difficult and many common assayers make mistakes. Such an assay by a reliable house like LeDoux & Co, 99 John St., N. Y. C., charge \$5.

Jones: "Tin Mines of the World;" Alaskan tin mining, in bulletin 692, U. S. G. S., at Wash., D. C.; Kemp: "Ore Deposits of U. S. & Canada." Article on tin in Mexico, in Eng. & M'g Journal for July 23, '27, McGraw-Hill Co., N. Y. C.,

Get your tin sample analyzed by Bureau of Mines, Ferry Bldg., San Francisco, Calif.; or by LeDoux & Co., New York.

Tarpon Lines and Slow-Trail Dogs

FOR THE fish—a chain to withstand his biting: For the dog—a chain to prevent his running.

Request:—"Kindly tell me.

1. Why a piece of buckskin is tied to the hook and the line tied to the buckskin when fishing for tarpon? How long is the buckskin and what is to keep shark from cutting it?

2. How do you train a dog to make it a slow trail dog on deer? Is a three-year-old dog that has had several deer killed ahead of her too old to stop running and barking and slow trail?"—VIRGIL HOWARD, Titusville, Florida.

Reply, by Mr. Ozark Ripley:—1. The buckskin used on tarpon lines is to keep the fish from cutting it. There are many salt varieties which can cut a line in case they strike, and the tarpon itself has by no means a soft mouth. Most of present day anglers have a small chain between the hook and the line. They usually use what is known as a Van Vleck hand-forged hook.

2. If you want to make a dog slow trail, let drag from its collar on several hunts a couple of light chains, about a foot longer than the length of the dog. If he goes to run, they will interfere with his movements; but with an old dog, when a deer has been killed ahead of it, it is pretty hard to stop from running and barking. But with age, lots of them begin to slow trail, though they never stop barking on trail.

Sharks

HAVE you ever tasted sharks' fin soup? The Chinese dote on it. "Ivory" ornaments and "cod-liver" oil.

Request:—"Are sharks found around the shores of Central America? If so, will you give some information on their habits?"—RALPH F. RUSS, Los Gatos.

Reply, by Mr. Charles Bell Emerson:—There are about 150 species of sharks, and most of them reproduce from eggs. A shark's egg is shaped like a small pillow with a long horn at each corner, which attaches to seaweed and other floating objects until the young are hatched. Sharks, though relics of a bygone age, as far as bodily structure is concerned, have, of all fishes, the most highly developed reproductive system. Some lay eggs protected by a horny shell, but for the most part, the egg stage is passed through within the body of the parent fish, and the young are born well grown and able to take good care of themselves.

"While evolution has been molding other more modern fishes into a great variety of forms to fit into every niche in the infinitely varied but unchanging environment of tropical seas, yet the shark has always remained much as we find him today." (*National Geographic Magazine*, Jan'y, 1921.)

The shark was formerly regarded as an undesirable inhabitant of the deep; feared when alive and useless when dead; but the shark has lately come into use and esteem in commercial circles. We now get oil from its liver, which is claimed to be equal to cod-liver oil for medicinal purposes. Sharks' fin soup is much appreciated by the Chinese; and the shark's eyes, after they have been boiled and treated, leave a hard residue which forms a sort of opalescent substance for making ornaments and jewelry. The outer skin is used for polishing hardwoods and ivory, while the inner layers are tanned and thus made into serviceable leather of different shades and qualities. This leather is practically waterproof and does not crack and is now being extensively employed in the manufacture of purses, traveling bags and fine belts.

Shark leather is superior to calf leather for shoes, according to the tests of scientists employed in the Bureau of Standards. Laboratory tests on water penetration and tensile strength prove it better, as do experiments carried on by laborers at work in ditches, postmen tramping their routes, and school-boys at play who have been wearing one shoe of calf skin and the other of shark.

Shark steak resembles in taste that of tender veal.

In Norway the shark is also caught and utilized. His head is made into glue, his teeth into "ivory" ornaments; his flesh into fertilizer; his liver into "cod-liver" oil; and his hide into leather of the finest quality; thus with millions of sharks in the North Pacific and North Atlantic, there is no reason why marketable and needful products could not be made from these sharks by the cities of each coast.



The TRAIL AHEAD



The next issue of ADVENTURE

A Complete Novel The Meddler

By W. C. Tuttle

"This shore must be the land of milk and honey," observed Sleepy Stevens, "when a cowboy goes around packin' ten thousand dollars in his pocket." That cowboy, however, paid for his rashness with death, and in the search for his mysterious killer, Hashknife Hartley, genial range detective, for the first time in his dangerous career reversed the usual procedure of hunting down clues—by obliterating them!

Heavenly Flowers

By James W. Bennett

Once Stanfield had been a matinée idol in the music halls of Melbourne and Sydney, but that was before he had proved to himself that a white man, if he had will power enough, could live through the bane of the "heavenly flowers" as well as a Chinese. Yet this man whom the black smallpox could not destroy, nor the blotching of his fine features dishearten—this man quavered at the thought of coming face to face with a small son at Singapore.

Hold and Hit

By Malcolm Wheeler Nicholson

In the vicinity of Juarez the Mexican bandit, the Butcher, launched swift, trail-less raids, while the Border cavalry regiment at El Paso drilled endlessly on the parade ground. "What we need is less drill and more war," objected Major Davies, but the colonel was of the old discipline school; and even when the regiment finally advanced upon the bandit's army, he insisted that they ride in severe lines of fours. Which they did till they happened into the depths of an unknown swamp—

And—Other Good Stories

PAY AS YOU GO, apprentice youths on a hunger ship, by BILL ADAMS; NIGHT WATCH, when ringside is the waterfront, by EDWARD L. MCKENNA; THE LAST OF WALKER'S MEN, how die the brave, by MEIGS O. FROST; IN GATUN GASH, fire, steel and brawn of the Canal builders, by EDGAR YOUNG; BURNING BRAKES, a hobo railroader, by E. S. DELLINGER; Part Two of THE SUN CHASERS, a novel of the Nebraska frontier, by HUGH PENDEXTER.



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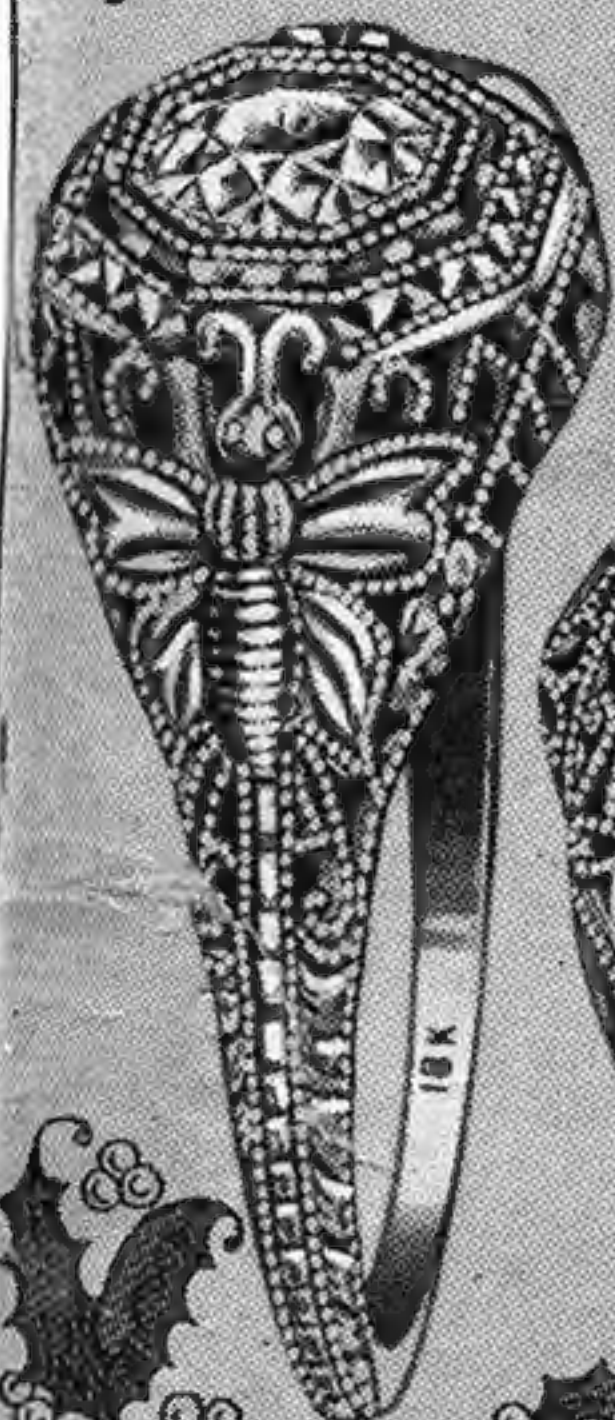
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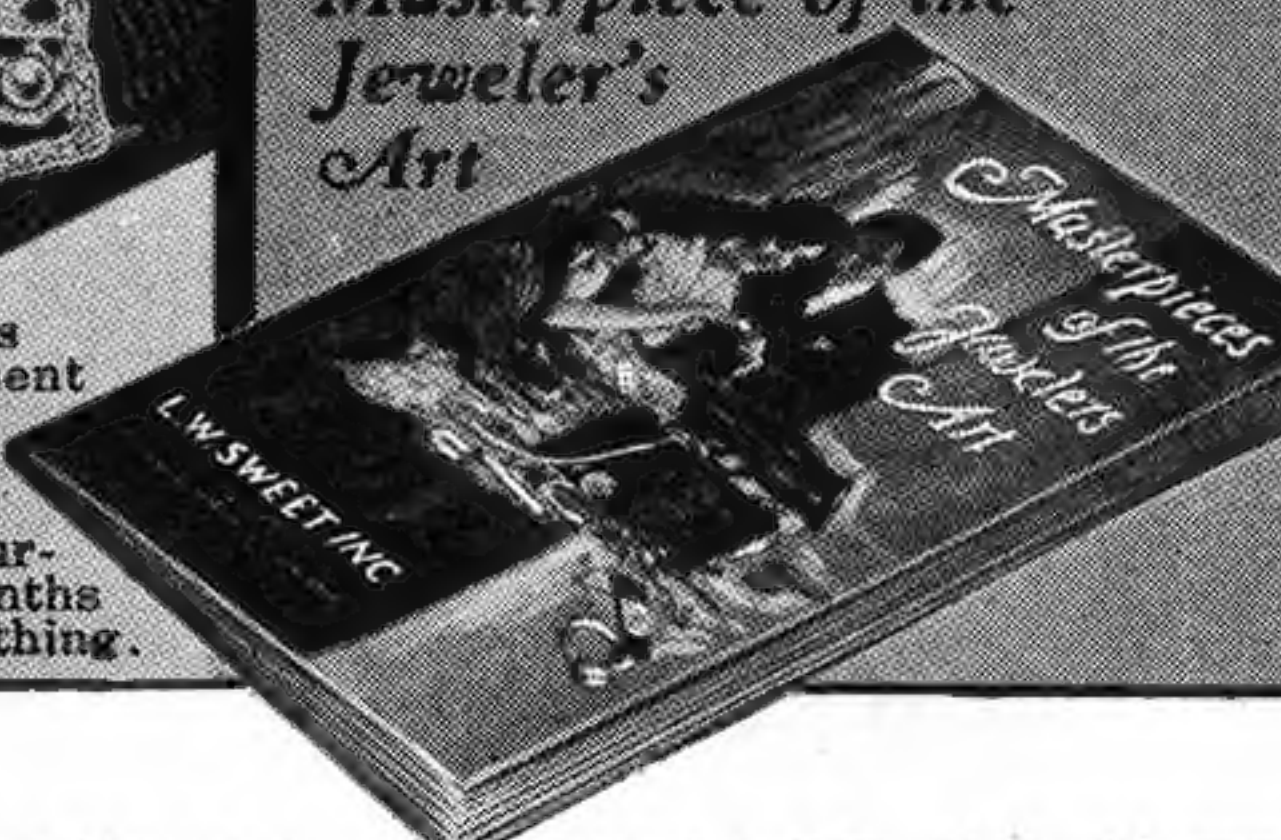
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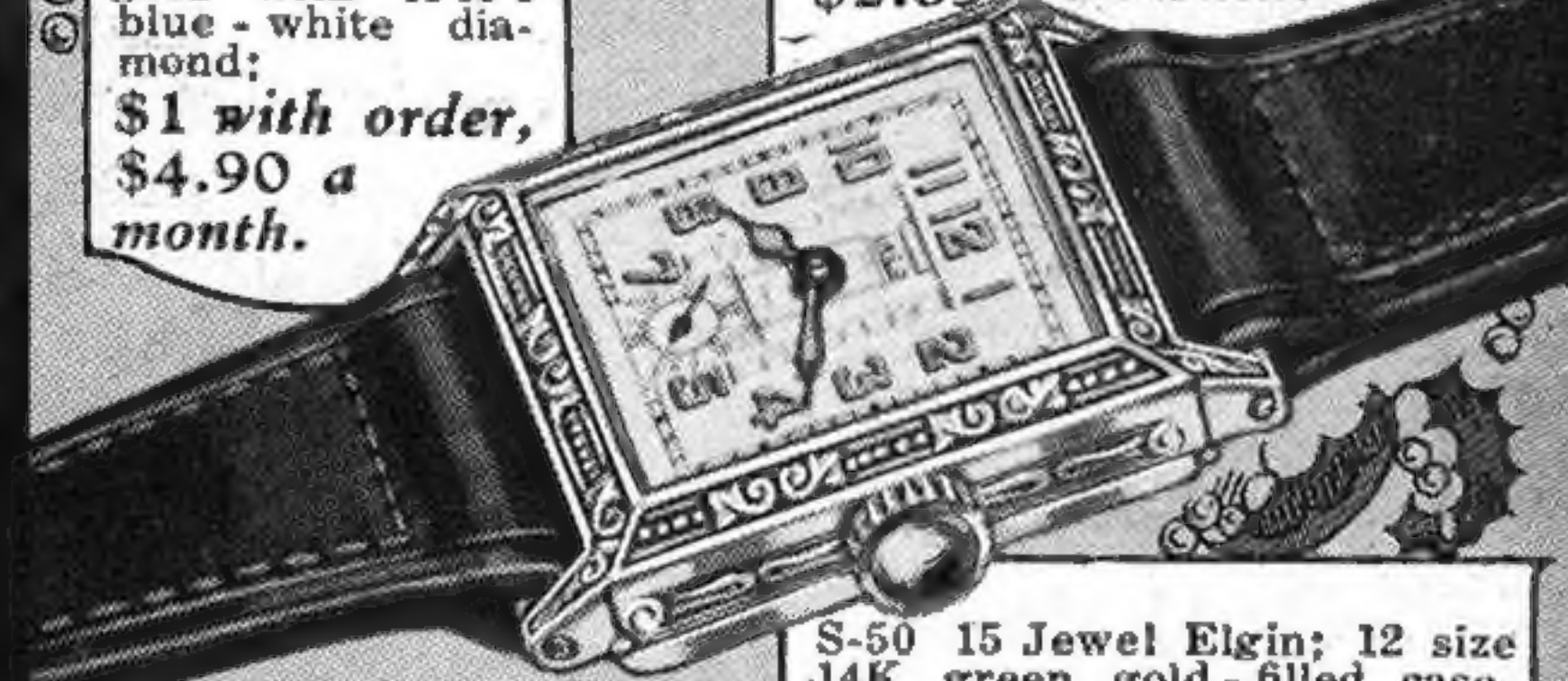
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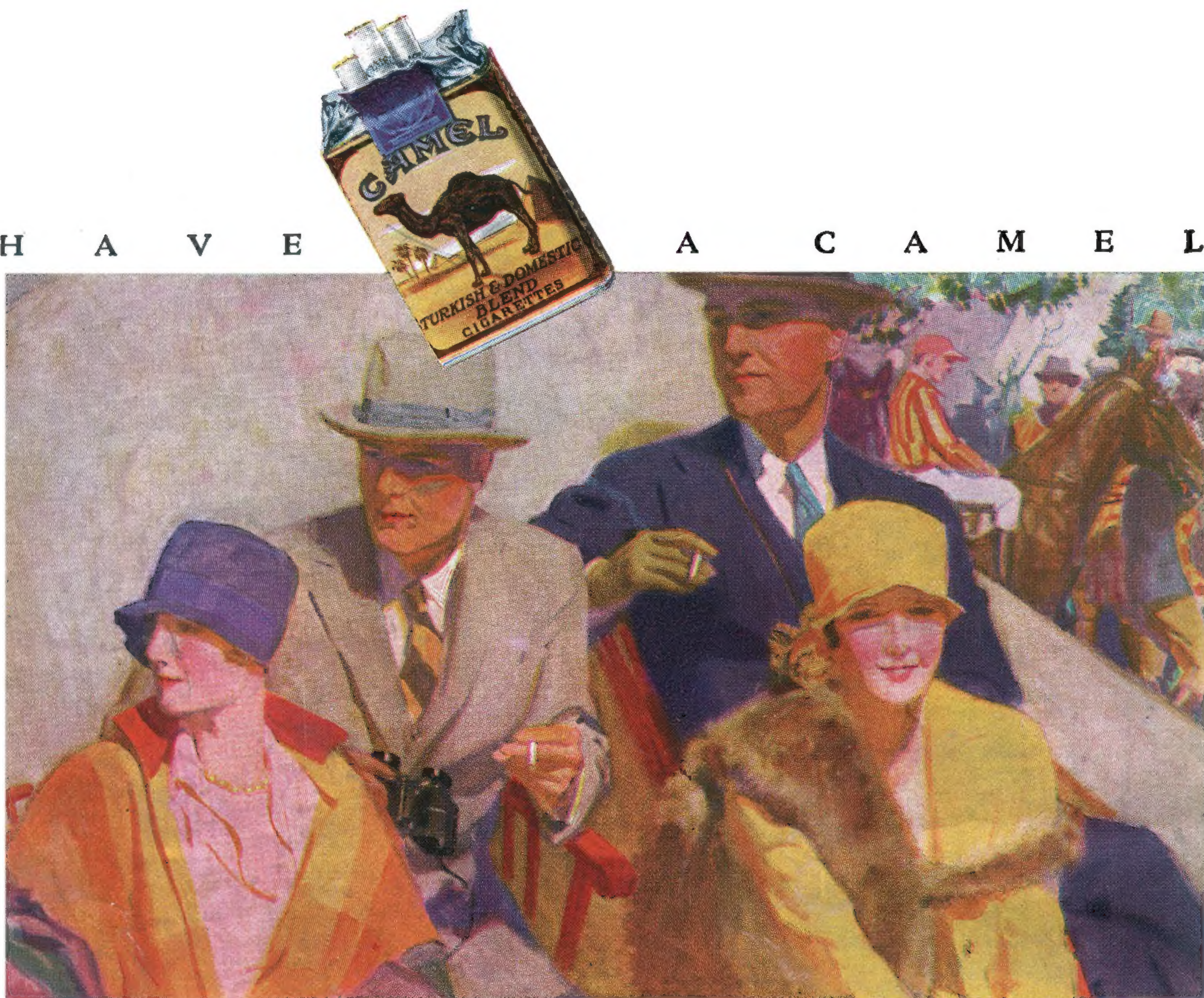
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